

Descartes's Dualism and the problem of making a union between The Mind and The Body

1. Abstract

In second meditations in the book “meditations of the first philosophy” Descartes raises a question about our senses. He argues we cannot rely on them in the way we do in our own mind, therefore in the first place we are just a thinking thing and our mind is separate from our body. this argument begins series of discussion until nowadays in the field of philosophy of mind.

Some of the works done on Descartes are not quietly focused on what was Descartes's main idea about this distinction and how he came up with a solution for the union of Mind and Body and their main focus is on the book principles and the fact that how Descartes can apply his rules on the distinctions between mind and body¹, but I think the main solution for this problem mentioned by Descartes, will be better understood through his concept of god and the fact that the only real substance² is God, and if we put our effort into understanding what he meant we can find out other approaches for this Dualism by which we can reach a solution in a way Descartes had in mind for the union problem.

In this paper I begin with introducing Descartes dualism and its relation to earlier philosophers such as Aristotle and Aquinas, then in the third section I give some remarks on human senses and actions and I discuss on how the mind and the body can interact with each other in Descartes idea and how some Descartes's contemporaries thought this kind of interactions is the key to the union problem. Next I will discuss the union problem by mentioning some of the paragraphs of the second and sixth meditations that are mostly referred to being inconsistent and are the real keys for the Descartes dualism and how he thinks of a human as a union and how the union problem has been raised and then In the next part of the section I introduce different approaches in readings of Descartes dualism and solving the problem of mind-body union and how some of the

¹ Like Rozemond,2002

² We will see later Descartes uses the word “absolute” and “relative” in his writings.

remarks were not quiet accorded to Descartes's writings. And finally, in the last section I will argue on how two different substances (as Descartes argues about their distinctness) like mind and body can make a substantial union (this union is a composite and substantial one and the word substantial is different from the word substance) through pointing out the Descartes concept of the clear and distinct idea such as God and how he could bring two distinct substances into a union, in addition to the fact that their existence is dependent on Him.

2.Introducing Descartes's dualism

In this section first I introduce Aristotle's Idea of the unity of the form and matter and Aquinas's Idea of the immortality of the soul and then I argue on how these thoughts and especially the theological readings in Aristotelian scholastic culture, were attached to Descartes idea of the mind. In the end, I discuss on how Descartes thoughts lead him to the Dualism and the mind-body problem.

2.1. Idea of the soul and the unity of the earlier philosophers

Today it has been discussed by many philosophers, Descartes's union of body and mind is mostly related to Aristotle's idea of the form and matter and their relation rather than Plato's idea of a mind who can control all the passions and actions of the body. One of the main evidences for this view is in the sixth meditations in which, he gives an example of the ship by pointing out that the mind is not the sailor of the body and you can see how this argument could be a key for understanding Descartes union problem in section 4, But for now I will just point: "that soul³ is to body as form is to matter"⁴.

³ In Descartes writings there is no differences between soul and mind and he uses them both for the same purposes.

⁴ Cottingham,1992

Although the Idea of the unit like the unity of the form and matter was in the Descartes's writings, he has been raised in such time that the *doctrine of the afterlife* was very common in the scholastic culture.

This doctrine emphasizes that the rational part of the soul is immortal and if you don't pay attention to this doctrine you will be in the way of atheism

Another consideration is the Idea of the incorporeality of the soul which was argued by Aquinas and we can see his view about the intellect part of the soul as Rozemond⁵ shows in her paper:

The intellectual principle, which is called the mind or intellect has an operation through itself [*per se*] in which the body does not participate. Nothing, however, can operate by itself unless it subsists through itself; for activity only belongs to a being in act, and hence something operates in the same way in which it is. For this reason, we do not say that heat heats, but that something hot heats. Consequently, the human soul, which is called intellect or mind, is something incorporeal and subsisting.

(*SummaTheologiae* 1.75.2)

Later, Descartes not only discusses the immortality of the mind but also, he mentions the distinction between the body and the mind in the synopsis to the meditations:

The human body, in so far as it differs from other bodies, is simply made up of a certain configuration of limbs and other accidents of this sort; whereas the human mind is not made up of any accidents in this way, but is a pure substance. For even if all the accidents of the mind change, so that it has different objects of the understanding and different desires and sensations, it does not on that account become a different mind; whereas the human body loses its identity merely as a result of a change in the shape of some of its parts. And it follows from this that while the body can very easily perish, the mind is immortal by its very nature.

(AT VII14: CSM II10)

So by considering these notions, we have a better way to understanding how Descartes was faced with dualism and the union problem.

⁵ Rozemond,2002

2.2. Descartes's dualism

Once again I should mention for understanding Descartes better, we should go through his writings with a sympathetic⁶ attitude and not just by considering one of his writings as the main key for understanding all of his works and thoughts.⁷

In second meditations, Descartes contends that there is one thing that we cannot have any doubts about it and it is the notion that “we are *thinking things*”:

Thought? This I do find: there is thought: this alone cannot be taken away from me. I am, I exist – that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I think. For it could be that if I ceased to have any thought, I would entirely (*totus*) cease to exist. At this point I admit nothing unless it is necessarily true; I am then, strictly speaking (*precise tantum*), a thinking thing, that is, a mind, spirit, intellect or reason, words whose meaning was previously unknown to me.

(2:18; AT 7:27)

Later in the sixth meditations, he uses his arguments from above to conclude that the mind is a distinct thinking thing that can be separated from the body:

Since I know that anything that I clearly and distinctly understand can be brought about by God just as I understand it, it is sufficient that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing without another in order for me to be certain that one is different from the other, since they can be placed apart [*seorsim poni*] at least by God. And it does not matter what power that happens, in order for them to be regarded as different. Consequently, from the very fact that I know that I exist, and that at the same time I notice nothing else at all to pertain to my nature or essence, except that I am a thinking thing, I conclude correctly that my essence consists in this one thing, that I am a thinking thing. And although perhaps (or rather, as I will soon say, certainly) I have a body, which is very closely joined to me, nevertheless because I have on one hand a clear and distinct idea of myself, insofar as I am only a thinking, not an extended thing, and on the other hand a distinct idea of body insofar as it is only an extended thing, not thinking, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.

(2:54; AT 7:78)

⁶ Hoffman in “The union and interaction of mind and body” point this idea too.

⁷ Mostly because some readings of the Descartes-as mentioned earlier- focused on his principles more than other writings and later I will discuss this approach will lead us to a different understanding of his works that is not as sympathetic as some works that been done by Yandell, Hoffman and skirry.

This also appears in the “Discourse de la method” that mind and body are two distinct substances:

a man who doubts everything material cannot for all that doubt his own existence. From this it follows (*il suit*) that he, that is his soul, is a being or substance which is not at all corporeal (*point du tout corporelle*), but whose nature is solely to think (*sa nature n'est que de penser*), and that this is the first thing, one can know with certainty"

(AT I 353: CSMK ss)⁸

Despite these, we can also see his idea of this distinctness in the “Discourse de la method” through him giving an example, like producing meaningful sentences, cannot be solely a mechanistic process and it should be a distinct mind that produces such things:

We can certainly conceive of a machine so constructed that it utters words (*paroles . . .* corresponding to . . . a change in its organs (e.g. if you touch it in one spot it asks what you want of it, and if you touch it in another spot it cries out that you are hurting it). But it is not conceivable that such a machine should produce arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer (*pour repondre au sens*) to whatever is said in its presence, as even the dullest of men can do.

(AT VI 56: CSM I 140)

Some readers of Descartes⁹ tried to understand his idea of mind and body by comparing his argument with Leibniz law, and again I should mention that this kind of reading is one of the examples of focusing on his principles and not the whole writings.

Leibnitz shows if $A=B$ then each property that is in the set A should be in the set B. and by using modus tollens we can infer if each property of A is distinct from each property of B Then A is not equal to B.

Jacquette uses this argument to show if we have a bundle of modes such as will, pain... and we can call them thought and we can see each of them are distinct from the bundle named body, therefore Body is not equal to Mind and they are two distinct substances.

In principles, Descartes emphasizes each substance can be a separate one and each of them has its own principle attribute and its own modes that are dependent to it(separately), and as I did mention earlier this comparing is only by focusing on the principles, not the whole writings, and in section 5 I will discuss on

⁸ Cottingham,1992

⁹ Like Dale Jacquette,2011

how this kind of approach will lead us to go through the way of trialism that perhaps was not the kind of approaches that Descartes had in mind.

So, a better way of understanding dualism will be reachable through his writings in meditations and how he considered himself (or the meditator who is going through the same meditation) as a thinking thing which is clearly a distinct and separate substance from the body. And there is no need to give the principles more power than it should have because this kind of approaches either lead us to trialism or the idea that there is no union of mind and body and these two interactions are accidental rather than something sustainable.

3.Sensations, passions and voluntary movements

One of the main keys to the problem of the union of mind and body -which will be discussed in the narrower sense in next sections- is sensations and the interaction between mind and body that in the earlier results of Descartes's arguments it has been established that they are two distinct substances.

In passions of the soul Descartes note that mind affects the body in the voluntary actions and body affects the mind in sensations:

Next, I note also that we do not notice that there is any subject which acts more immediately upon our soul than the body to which it is joined. We should consequently recognize that what is a passion in the soul is usually an action in the body.

(1:328; AT 11:328)

By arguing about these interactions, Descartes prepares a context for his contemporaries to raise sets of objections and debates. In the fifth set of objections Pierre Gassendi questions on how the mind can control the body:

How can there be effort directed against anything, or motion set up in it, unless there is mutual contact between what moves and what is moved? And how can there be contact without a body when, as is transparently clear by the natural light, 'naught apart from the body, can touch or yet be touched.'

(AT VII 341: CSM II 237)

In this objection, Gassendi points to this problem: if a thinking thing is distinct from the body, it cannot move it. Princess Elizabeth noticed this problem too, and asked about it in an even stronger argument:

I beseech you to tell me how the mind of man (being only a thinking substance) can determine the spirits of the body in order to make voluntary actions. For it seems that every determination of movement is made by the impulsion of the thing moved by the manner in which

it is pushed by what moves it, or else from the qualification and figure of the surface of the latter. Contact is required for the first two conditions and extension for the third. You entirely exclude the latter from the notion you have of the mind and the former seems incompatible with an immaterial thing.

(AT III 661, my translation)

In this objections, by reminding of the mode of mind that is thought and it is clearly a distinct substance from the body that its mode is extension, she is arguing that this immaterial thing cannot *cause* a material thing to move. But, I should mention These two sets of objections is mainly about the causal connection between the mind and body that would happen to anyone who sees Descartes as a reductionist and even so it is true that in the “Treatise on man” his main Idea is that body is only a machine that every action is caused by a Gland through its animal spirits¹⁰, but Descartes didn’t see any difficulties for mind and body to be a *composite union* which is entirely dependent on an absolute substance [God], and he even mentioned this interaction for giving an example of how much strong is the union. As Cottingham¹¹ shows, in addition to scientific aspects of the reading of Descartes (which someone like Elizabeth went through and lead her to see just a causal connection that can’t be done with two distinct substances), there is also theological aspects in his writings that we should consider for better understanding of the union problem. But of course, we cannot mention this problem without mentioning these sets of objections.

Although Descartes hadn’t just a reductionist point of view, he was aware that by raising dualism we would face the union problem. In meditations he brings another argument to show that mind and body are united by saying he has confused sensations and these sensations are needed for the interaction between our mind and body and he even says that if instead of us it was an angel, it didn’t need a similar pain or sensation [like we have] for understanding that its body had a problem because it is a pure intellect mind and its mind percept this problem in a clearer way than ours:

'[for if an angel were in a human body, he would not have sensations as we do, but would simply perceive the motions which are caused by external objects, and in this way would differ from a real man']

¹⁰ The word Descartes uses are “Esprits animaux”, and it is essential to mention that The word “Esprit” means soul and as long as we know (and mentioned earlier in this paper), in his writings there is no difference between mind and soul and he uses them for them same purposes. By this knowledge we can even refer the sailor argument in next section for our purpose that in fact mind is in a deep union with body and its relation is analogous to the relation between form and matter in Aristotle.

¹¹ Cottingham,1992

Because an angel would perceive these sensations and problems intellectually rather than a causally one like ours. And, we cannot say that mind and body have not a causal interaction but this kind of interaction according to Descartes, it is understandable and in accordance with the union of the mind and body and it is recognizable by nature of ours.¹²

4. The union problem

Cottinghams¹³ opinion about dividing the dualism into three parts, namely scientific metaphysical and theological is something that we should consider for our reading about union problem. Although I use Cottingham's idea, I don't use the exact same names and approach in this paper as Cottingham had in his own, because my purpose here is to define how Descartes did see the union and I don't have the exact same purpose as Cottingham had.

In this section, firstly, I show the physiological approach and how it leads to saying that maybe there is no union and all of this interactions are accidental, secondly I discuss the Descartes "principles" and his ideas about first philosophy and how some philosophers read it misleadingly, and in the end I argue that both of these approaches are not enough separately, And both of them are in relation with each other under the spirit of the theological point of view of Descartes (as I mentioned before he was raised in a scholastic culture and for a sympathetic reading of his work we should consider all of these), And it leads us to the next section.

4.1. Mind and body are not a union

In "Treatise on man" and in another sense in "passions de lame" Descartes observed the mind wholly united to the body, and also in the sixth meditations he has an analogy that is one of the main keys to the union of mind and body that he had in mind:

¹² Skirry, 2005

¹³ Cottingham, 1992

Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form one thing (*unum quid*). If this were not so, I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage by the pure intellect (*puro intellectu*),³ just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken. Similarly, when the body needs food or drink, I should have an explicit understanding of the fact, instead of having confused sensations of hunger and thirst. For these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain and so on are nothing but confused modes of thinking, which arise from the *union*, and as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body.

(AT VII 81: CSM II 56, modified)¹⁴

By considering “I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship”, despite the fact that we can see that Descartes’s idea of the relationship between body and mind is more close to Aristotle’s than Plato’s, we are lead to find out how Descartes saw the mind and body as a union. But the problem will arise if someone thinks that Descartes have had just a scientific view, and like what he did in “treatise on man” he was just reading the human as a machine that works and the voluntary movements of the body is somehow accidental rather than any other explanations.¹⁵

The question here is not how mind and body interact with each other or are them a union or not, but the real question is *what kind of union they are?*, which leads us to the second part of this section.

4.2. What kind of union the mind and body are?

By using the results of the last part we can reach a point in which we know that Descartes believed that there is a union. And about the question that how we should see this union I will mention two of the approaches of reading this union in this part (those ones who weren’t sympathetic to Descartes and their reading of

¹⁴ Skirry, 2005

¹⁵ Like the set of objections mentioned earlier about the problem of the union. But as mentioned these kinds of objections was not any problem for Descartes as we can see in the sailor analogy that he sees the human as a union.

the principles lead them through another pass). And then in the next part, I show the better solution of Yandell, Hoffman, and Skirry ¹⁶and then in the next section, I will discuss it in a narrower sense.

In principles, Descartes contends that each substance has its own nature and is completely on its own nature and I mentioned earlier how this will be lead us to dualism, but the problem that I want to argue here is about the phrase “substantial union” that he uses for mind and body. For giving an example we see this phrase in his reply to Regius:

We affirm that human beings are made up of body and soul, not by the mere presence or proximity of one to the other [which Regius had asserted in his clarification], but by a true substantial union.

(ATIII508/CSMKIII209)

I should now make a difference between substance (such as mind and body) and the substantial union. Some readers have been misled by this phrase to a trialism and the fact that the two substances of the mind and body come in to a union which is also a substance and has its own principle attributes¹⁷, but the phrase he uses here is a “true substantial union” and we can see in his third meditations that if we are a thinking thing and we can doubt there is only because of the existence of an infinite substance which is God and we can know that the “true” in here needs a justifier. And as long as we know in his foundations that justifier was only the God. Also from his principles we learned each substance is distinct and even when they come into a union they can’t become another substance and we know that the substance of mind and the substance of the body have their own separate modes and they are not jointed in any ways.¹⁷

By considering the fact that the union of these two substances can’t become another substance, Rozemond¹⁸ has another solution. Rozemond, by focusing on the principles and the fact that each substance has its own modes and each substance has only one principle attribute that Descartes contend in the “principles”, mentions three possibilities: first that mind is a mode of the body. Second, that body is a mode of mind and third: *“the possibility that there is one substance with two principles attributes. thought and extension.”*

The first two is not possible (Rozemond agrees too), and the reason of them as we mentioned earlier is that in meditations and other writings Descartes

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ We can also see this idea of the rejection of the trialism in Cottingham(1986), Cottingham(1985), yandell(2008)

¹⁸ Rozemond,2002

brings a strong argument about the incorporeality of the mind and its separability from the body and there is no need to discuss them again in here.

About the third one, she argues that we can read Descartes in this way and there is no need for Descartes to contend that each substance should only have one principle attribute.

But again I should mention that by emphasizing on principles alone for finding a solution in the union problem we push ourselves away from a reading of Descartes that is sympathetic. And finding a solution that coheres more with the whole body of his writings. This approach is only a kind of amendment that maybe it leads us to ignore the main point of the Descartes idea of the mind-body union.

4.3. Mind and body are a composite union

By using the results of the last parts we understood that mind and body are a union and their being a union doesn't mean that they make another substance. Besides, this union is a substantial one. Now, what is this substantial union?

Because this union is not a substance it should be a composite of two distinct substances. The question here is that how this could happen and if the causal interactions of them are not accidental how can we understand this union?

In this part, I introduce the main key of understanding of the mind-body union and in the next section, I will argue about this kind of approach with more details.

Descartes refers to the union by the notion of primitiveness and generality of this primitiveness and Skirry¹⁹ shows that how this generality of the notions of the being could be in levels: "The notions of being, number and duration are the most general, since they apply to every conceivable thing. The notions of extension and thought constitute the next lower level of generality. The notion of extension applies to bodies on their own and entails the notions of shape and motion; whereas the notion of thought applies to minds on their own and includes the notions of the perceptions of the intellect and the inclinations of the will. Finally, Descartes gets to the primitive notion of the soul and the body together or mind-body union, and the notions depending on it. These are the notions of the mind's power to move the body (i.e. the notion of voluntary bodily movement) and the body's power to bring about sensations and passions (i.e. the notions of sensation and the passions).² This notion is then on the lowest level of generality."²⁰

¹⁹ Skirry, 2005

²⁰ Ibid, pp.147

By using this kind of approach and some other remarks that I discuss in next section we will be led to a position of knowing that we have only one absolute substance which is God and by using this and the fact that Descartes believes that “the mind and body are united in a real and substantial manner”²¹ I will go to the next section.

5. Solution to mind-body problem

Now we have reached to a point that I can say the union of mind and body(human) is a composite union that has its own existence with its relation to the benevolence of God (as we know that Descartes’s God is benevolence and the absolute substance).²²

In one his writings²³, Descartes mentions two notions, an absolute nature, and a relative one:

1 I call 'absolute' whatever has within it the pure and simple nature in question; that is, whatever is viewed as being independent. (AT X 381:CSMI21)

2 The 'relative', on the other hand, is what shares the same nature, or at least something of the same nature, in virtue of which we can relate it to the absolute and deduce it from the absolute in a definite series of steps. (AT X 382: CSM I 21)

3 The concept 'relative' involves other terms besides, which I call relations: these include whatever is said to be dependent, an effect, composite . . . (AT X 382: CSM 121)

4 For some things are more absolute than others from one point of view, yet more relative from a different point of view . . . Thus, a species is something absolute with respect to particulars, but with respect to the genus it is relative. (AT X 382: CSM I 22)

5 We should, as I said, attend carefully to the simple natures which can be intuited in this way [i.e. by the light innate within us], for these are the ones which in each series we term simple in the highest degree. As for all the other natures we can apprehend them only by deducing them from those which are simple in the highest degree . . . (AT X 383: CSM I 22)

²¹ And whenever the occasion arises, in public and in private, you should give out that you believe that a human being is a true *ens per se* and not an *ens per accidens*, and that the mind is united in a real and substantial manner to the body. You must say that they are united not by position or disposition, as you assert in your last paper - for this too is open to objection and, in my opinion, quite untrue - but by a true mode of union, as everyone agrees. (AT III 493: CSMK 206), letter to Regius

²² Yandell, 2008 : Why is the being that results from the combination of these two elements a being *per se* '[Because the union which joins a human body and soul to each other is not accidental to a human being, but essential, since a human being without it is not a human being' (AT III 508/CSMK III 209).

²³ *Rules* (c. 1628) and the letter to Elizabeth (May 1643)

Therefore, by applying these rules and the results of Skirry's argument (about the different levels of generality of primitiveness) to the three substances of body, mind and God, we can get to the point of seeing how the substance of mind and the substance of body are general on their own or as Hoffman refers to them²⁴ : they are complete substances when we are looking on their own, but in another sense when we are looking to the whole composite union of human and compare them to the substance of God, for as long as we know that substance is the real and infinite one and at this level mind and body are dependents to the substance of God and this substance is the Complete and absolute one. In addition, the other two are incomplete substances.

Yandell²⁵ shows this solution by bringing another evidence from Descartes. He argues that the difference among these three substances is because that the first two are finite and the third one is infinite and from the point we learned about absolute and relative we can know how these two can depend to the absolute substance of God:

Strictly, this entails (as Descartes noted) that God, as creator and sustainer of all else, is the only substance. We can say, though, that minds and matter are each substance in a limited sense in that they can exist without any other (finite) thing, and depend only on God for their existence

(AT VIII A 24 5/CSM I 210)

6. Conclusion

According to what has been discussed, we know for sure that Descartes saw the whole human as a union and not an accidental one. But if we read Descartes just through his metaphysics and by focusing on his principles, we could be led to a radical dualistic view which is not solvable unless we make some amendment to his works and say that some of his thoughts were inconsistent and should be corrected.

Rather than going through these kinds of approaches or bringing out dualism, we have another solution in which we can understand that the mind and body are two distinct substances (but finite) and they have their own essence. Although,

²⁴ Hoffman, 2002, pp. 397-398 : in his paper he quotes the fourth replies (to Arnauld) for showing that how Descartes mentioned that we have two different substances the complete one and the incomplete one, and this approach is similar to the idea of Yandell, 2008, Skirry, 2005 and also this paper.

²⁵ Yandell, 2008

with regarding their relation to the sustainer substance of God (which is the infinite and the only absolute substance) we can see how they are dependent on it and are incomplete substances.

Therefore, the theological aspects of Descartes's thought are one of the other keys that should be regarded as a better understanding of his works and his solution to the union problem.

In addition, I should mention here that, without considering these aspects and their relation to the Descartes's metaphysics we may be even going through a passage in where we are trying to understand Descartes by our contemporary notions of the mind-body problem which is not the sympathetic attitude that has been mentioned earlier in this paper.

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