

Limitations of Cartesian Dualism

Introduction

The modern theories of dualism, centric to the study of the philosophy of mind, principally find their origin in Descartes' *Meditations*. In his writings, Descartes asserts that there exists a separation between the mind and the body. He states that the mind and the body clearly have different essences or principal attributes, and thus cannot be identical to one another.¹ Although it seems tempting to agree with Descartes' position on the debate between dualism and monism, by analyzing Descartes' arguments for the dualism of mind and body, we can show that it is not only unreasonable but also illogical to agree with his arguments particularly due to their inability to account for the concept mind-body interactions and their inappropriate use of Leibniz's Law.

In this paper, after briefly discussing the Cartesian arguments for mind-body dualism, I will try to discern the problems that one would encounter in such a line of reasoning. Further, I will look at the correspondence between Descartes and Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, and discuss the Masked Man Fallacy to see why Cartesian Dualism is inadequate or even flawed. I will then look at Descartes' response to these possible imperfections with his theory, and see if they can vindicate the doctrine of Cartesian Dualism.

Descartes' Argument for Dualism

The foundation to Descartes' argument for the dualism of mind and body consists of the distinction between the essence of the body and the essence of the mind. In order to lay out the entirety of Descartes' argument, let's first discuss how he arrives at his understanding of the

¹ Ariew, R. (2000). *Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, p. 135.

essences of the mind and the body by classifying them as mental or material substance, and why he indicates that the distinction in these essences implies that there is a distinction in the substances in question.

Cartesian Dualism is ontologically a kind of a substance dualism.² A substance, in this context, refers to a thing which possesses a certain collection of properties. Descartes believes that there exist only two kinds of substance, each of which could exist independently, in such a way that their existence depends only upon God. These are material substances (*res extensa*) and mental substances (*res cogitans*).³ The existence of the properties of each of these substances depends on the existence of the substance. For Descartes, the properties of any kind of substance arise from the essences or the principal attributes - the fundamental properties of the bodies. He states that the essence of material substances is extension, whereas the essence of mental substances is thought.⁴

In his second mediation, Descartes shows that the most certain belief that one can hold if one were to doubt everything is the existence of the self, which is directly implied by the nature of doubting as a kind of thinking (*cogito ergo sum*).⁵ He suggests, using this idea, that a self is what he understands as a mind, and that act of thinking is a property of the mind which cannot exist without the existence of the mind. Thus, a mind is a mental substance, and its essence is thought.

² Dualism, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Section 2.3 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism>

³ Ariew, R. (2000). *Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, p. 36-37, 109-110

⁴ Substance, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Section 2.4 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/substance>

⁵ Ariew, R. (2000). *Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, p. 108

Further, Descartes notes that by body, he understands all that is capable of being enclosed in a place, bounded by shape, and disposed in a way such that it excludes any other bodies from itself.⁶ Thus, Descartes' understanding of a body possesses the property of extension. Since the body's extension depends on the existence of the body, a body is a material substance, and its essence is extension.

Descartes claims that since the essences or principal attributes of mind and body are different, the attributes are opposed. He reasons this by indicating that, in saying two principal attributes are different from each other, it is implied that the principal attributes are not the same. Moreover, as he contends, if two opposing principal attributes were to be present in the same substance there would be a contradiction, for that which is itself cannot be different from itself (from Leibniz's Law or the Indiscernibility of Identicals). That is to say, the same substance cannot have two contradicting properties (e.g. a cup of tea cannot be both hot and cold). As a result, Descartes reckons that one thing cannot have two natures or essences.⁷ He concludes, since the essences of mind and body are different from each other, and since one thing cannot have two natures, that no mind is identical to a body. To lay out his argument in parts:

1. The essence of body is extension (Premise 1)
2. The essence of mind is thought (Premise 2)
3. Thought is distinct from extension (Premise 3)
4. The same thing cannot have two different natures (Premise 4)
5. No mind is identical to a body (Conclusion)

⁶ Ariew, R. (2000). *Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, p. 109

⁷ Ariew, R. (2000). *Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, p. 284

As it can be clearly seen, that the conclusion deductively follows from the premises. Thus, Descartes' argument is a deductively valid one. However, the soundness of the argument that Descartes offers to justify his notion of duality can still be put into question, as there seems to be insufficient reason to believe the truth of the premises. Moreover, the doctrine of duality that arises from this line of thought has certain issues, in that, it fails to account for a few details of the relation between the mind and the body.

The Problems with Cartesian Duality

The first few objections to the doctrine of Cartesian Duality are found by considering the first three premises. Together, the first three premises indicate that there is a distinction between the natures of mind and body. That is, that the Cartesian understanding of 'body' is as a corporeal substance whose principal attribute is extension, and the Cartesian understanding of 'mind' is as an ethereal substance, one that exists outside of physical space, whose principal attribute is thought.

This hints towards the first problem: if the mind and body are comprised of two fundamentally different kinds of substances, and exist in different kinds of spaces, how is it that the mind and body interact? This objection was first brought up by Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, where she asks Descartes to explain how an unextended thing (the mind) can modify the motion of an extended thing (the body).⁸ Herein lies a contradiction between the laws of physics which Descartes provides in his *Discourse on the Method*⁹ and his understanding of the distinction between mind and body. If the mind and body are able to interact, each must be an

⁸ Shapiro, L. (2007). *The Correspondence Between Princess Elisabeth and Descartes*, p. 62

⁹ Ariew, R. (2000). *Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, p. 37-41

extended thing which has the potential to have an effect on the motion of the other, or an interaction between mind and body would not be possible.¹⁰ If it were the case that the mind and body both have the nature of being extended, the argument in consideration for Cartesian Dualism would no longer be sound, since the second and third premises would no longer be true. In addition to this, the absence of a distinction between the natures of the mind and the body would indicate that the idea of dualism of mind and body altogether is overturned.

Furthermore, it can be argued that Descartes fails to provide adequate reasoning for thought and extension to be opposing natures. Even if Descartes is correct in indicating that the principal attribute of the mind is thought, and that of the body is extension, it is easily conceivable that either thought or extension can be a cause or a mode of the other. In such a scenario, the nature of mind and body would be the same, but their functions would be different. And so, since the nature of the two entities is the same, there is no room left for Cartesian Dualism (or dualism of any kind).

The third and final objection in consideration follows from Descartes usage of the Indiscernibility of Identicals or Leibniz's Law in his third and fourth premises, and a theory that is known as the Masked Man Fallacy.

For a brief explanation of the Masked Man Fallacy, suppose I were to make the assumption that a Masked Man has robbed a bank. Since the Masked Man has the property of me not knowing his identity, and my father has the property of me knowing his identity, by Leibniz's Law (the same thing cannot have two opposing properties), the Masked Man and my father are not the same person. However, this is an incorrect usage of Leibniz's Law, since my

¹⁰ Shapiro, L. (2007). *The Correspondence Between Princess Elisabeth and Descartes*, p. 68

understanding of the properties of the Masked Man and my father is not the same as the true properties of the Masked Man and my father - indeed, it is possible for them to be the same person, and the limitations of my understanding ought not to have an effect on this possibility.¹¹ What one understands to be the property of a thing is not the property of that thing, but a property of the understanding of the person, and the two cannot be used interchangeably.

If the Masked Man fallacy is applied to Descartes' argument for duality, it can be argued that Descartes' understanding of the principal attributes or essences of mind and body, which arise from his meditations, is not the same as the authentic properties which the mind and body possess. As a result, it is not necessarily the case that the mind and the body are distinct by virtue of their properties, which Descartes attributes to them, being distinct. Even if the mind and the body are separate entities, it is very much possible that the mind is a part of the physical world. Again, if there is no distinction between the natures of the mind and the body, the argument in consideration for Cartesian Duality is no longer sound.

Descartes' Defense and Concluding Thoughts

In many different texts, Descartes has offered a variety of different arguments to defend his notion of duality.

In response to Elisabeth, Descartes says that our understanding of the union of mind and body is but a primitive one.¹² He believes that understanding alone cannot help us to grasp the concept of the interaction between minds and bodies, but it can be achieved through a union of understanding and sensations. He provides certain mechanics to help explain how the mind and

¹¹ Lacewing, M. (2016). *Descartes' Arguments for Distinguishing Mind and Body*.

¹² Shapiro, L. (2007). *The Correspondence Between Princess Elisabeth and Descartes*, p. 65

body may interact despite the difference in their substantial natures.¹³ Unfortunately, Descartes' defense seems far-fetched. It leads to quite a few contradictions, and even appears to violate his own rule against accepting ideas which are not understood clearly and distinctly.

Descartes also provides a refutation against the objection from the Masked Man Fallacy. He hints that when the mind and body are considered individually and all that is known about them is doubted, it will always be the case that the most certain thing that can be known about them would be that the mind is a thinking thing and that the body is an extending thing.¹⁴ Again, this way of thought is not adequate to show the distinction between the concepts of thought and extension. This still allows us to believe that thought and extension can be causes or modes of each other, which would still indicate that Cartesian Duality is erroneous.

At the end of the analysis of Descartes' argument for his doctrine of duality, considering the objections which have been covered and Descartes' responses to these objections, it seems that Descartes comes short of providing a convincing argument for the duality of mind and body. The objections all point to one thing - while the mind and body may be different entities, it is not the case that they are different substances. Since this indicates that the distinction between the natures of the mind and the body is absent, monism seems to be an appealing alternative. In such a system, the mind and the body are comprised of the same kind of substance, such that the interaction between the mind and body is a possibility. The properties of thought or extension, in this scenario, are the causes or modes of each other (or are both results or modes of a third kind of entity).

¹³ Shapiro, L. (2007). *The Correspondence Between Princess Elisabeth and Descartes*, p. 69

¹⁴ Ariew, R. (2000). *Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, p. 168-171