

Ruiqi Wang

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Text & Ideas Essay 1, Prompt 2

Have you ever attempted to stop your thoughts? It's a common experience when our minds appear to operate beyond our control. Even during sleep, our brains remain active, perpetually engaged in thought. It's during these moments that we begin to think about the fundamental question of ourselves: the nature of our being. In my perspective, we, as human beings, are thinking entities, or to be more precise, we are a dynamic combination of body and mind, constituting an evolving and enduring entity. It is this intrinsic nature of our mind, perpetually in motion, that aligns with the subject of our inquiry – the lasting 'conscious thing.'"

René Descartes and William James offer contrasting views regarding the question of the lasting mind. Descartes believes that the existence of a lasting mind independent of the body in his foundational work *Meditation*. In contrast, James approaches this problem as a psychologist. He claims that our perception of a continuous self is a perceptual illusion created by successive mental states or "pulses". While both Descartes and James put forth compelling arguments, they harbor limitations within their respective viewpoints.

Although I find James' empirical approach attractive, I disagree with his conclusion. He states in his essay that "just such a train of successive thinkers is the stream of mental states (each with its complex object cognized and emotional and selective reaction there upon)". (P197) This means that thinking is a succession of momentary mental states or 'pulses,' which collectively craft the illusion of a continuous self. For James, if the self is the act of thinking,

then the self ceases to exist when the mental state of thinking stops. Since our thinking is discontinuous, the self is also discontinuous.

However, I have an alternative explanation for our introspective experience of thinking. While James sees the pauses between the pulses as disconnects, separating each pulse as distinct and propping up a mere illusion of continuity, I propose that the same sense data can be explained as a continuous act of thinking where the pulses are separated not by true gaps but by neglected or forgotten memories. We are always thinking; we just forget that fact. An obvious example is the act of sleeping. When we fall into sleep, we often experience it as if we have entered a temporary pause, despite the possibility of dreams during this period. We wake up with the sensation of having 'lost' eight hours of consciousness. However, brain activities never stopped, nor did thinking. Another illustration is the memory gap. I recall an occasion when excessive alcohol led to my first blackout. During that specific timeframe, I indeed have consciousness and responded to my friends with awareness, yet my memory was incapable of recalling those moments. It felt like a pause or disruption in my thought process. These seeming discontinuities in our introspective sense data can be explained differently from James' theory, so they cannot defeat the belief in the persistent mind.

The crux of my argument lies in the proposition that our thinking is never truly discontinuous. We think consistently, uninterruptedly. The apparent gaps or interruptions arise not from real stops of thought but rather from forgetting. Our memory system is imperfect, and often filters select portions of our thoughts, so that there is an illusory notion that our past thinking was marked by discontinuity. James' argument against the lasting mind depends on the premise that thinking is discontinuous, supported by an explanation of our introspective sense

data. My alternative explanation for that sense data defeats James' premise. Thus, the mind remains an unbroken continuum, as does the act of thinking.

I now illustrate my theory of the continuous mind with a mathematical metaphor. Instead of viewing consciousness as a series of discrete pulses, consider it as a continuous line formed by the integration of these pulses between which the temporal distances are negligibly small. This picture resembles integral calculus, where the summation of infinitely small factors results in a continuous whole. In this context, the self, taken as the "I" at this moment of enunciation, represents the endpoint of this continuous line, continuously evolving and enduring over time.

But isn't this what Descartes believe? Descartes staunchly defended the idea of a persisting mind, asserting that the mind is distinct from the body. He famously declared, "Cogito, ergo sum", highlighting the indubitable existence of the thinking self. He writes in his Meditation: "these activities are all aspects of my thinking, and are all inseparable from myself. The fact that it is I who doubt and understand and want is so obvious that I can't see how to make it any clearer. But the 'I' who imagines is also this same 'I'. For even if (as I am pretending) none of the things that I imagine really exist, I really do imagine them, and this is part of my thinking. Lastly, it is also this same 'I' who senses, or is aware of bodily things seemingly through the senses." (P20) Here he emphasizes the identity of 'I' who think. No matter how many different aspects I may have or under any kind of condition, the 'I' stay the same. I align with this perspective, that the changings or uncertainties within the 'I' do not signify the emergence of a new 'I.' Each moment of learning or sensory experience contributes to the enrichment of the self. The 'I' of today remains identical to the 'I' of yesterday and even 'I' from years past.

However, my understanding of the mind-body relationship diverges from Descartes' perspective. I contend that the mind and body coexist and are interconnected. He believes that only mind is integral to the self. He writes that "I have a clear and distinct idea of myself as something that thinks and isn't extended, and one of body as something that is extended and does not think. So it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it." (P51) In his view, mind is independent from the body. In contrast, I propose that the mind and body coexist in a symbiotic relationship. Our bodies are undeniably physical entities, engaged in continuous interaction with the external world. We perceive and experience the world through our physical senses, sensing our own bodies and being sensed by others. This unbroken connection to the external environment underscores the continuous existence of our physical bodies. The mind, intricately linked to the body, responds to this ongoing interaction as long as we are alive. Even from the moment of our existence as fetuses, our sensory experiences and bodily sensations serve as the foundation for thought and consciousness. This unbroken connection between the body and the external world ensures the body's continuous existence. Since the mind responds to this ongoing sensory input, the continuity of the body naturally implies the continuity of the mind. The mind is not a separate entity but rather an integral part of this coexistent relationship, persisting in harmony with the continuous existence of the body.

In conclusion, the question of our lasting 'conscious thing' has intrigued philosophers for centuries. Our thinking is an unceasing process, with gaps in memory mistakenly suggesting interruptions. I propose that the mind and body coexist and are interconnected, with our bodies' continuous interaction with the external world with the mind responding to ongoing sensory input, highlighting the persistence of consciousness. Therefore, our conscious existence is a

continuous, evolving entity, intricately woven into our physical bodies and the world around us, revealing the enduring nature of our conscious selves.

References

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