

An Explication of the Cartesian Self and its Relation to the Body

I. Thesis

The historical conversation between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618 – 1680) and René Descartes (1596 – 1650) illuminates the intricacies of Cartesian metaphysics. In this paper, I will recount Descartes' conception of the self and trace the correspondence and the argument therein, then I argue that Descartes plausibly responds to Elisabeth's concern, i.e., his metaphysical system remains functional. Finally, I will consider two objections.

II. Concept of the Self

The self, a person, or as Descartes refers to it, 'I', is a very simple concept. Found in the second meditation, Descartes defines it thusly: "But what then am I? A thing that thinks" (19). While the concept itself, a thinking thing, is simple to grasp, it is illuminating to understand what properties are contained therein, how it functions, and its relation to other things.

II.A. Properties of the Self

Descartes reaches the concept of the self through a very specific avenue of thought that determine his core properties. Even before his revelation, "I am, I exist," Descartes has stripped away almost everything from existence by powerful thought experiments (17). By imagining himself dreaming he doubts the validity of physical reality and by imagining himself being deceived by an evil demon he doubts the validity of hitherto *a priori* concepts. Because such things may or may not exist, and yet he still clearly exists regardless, he finds "that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing," meaning he is only a thinking object (54). Despite the possibility he could be currently existing in conjunction with a material and extended thing because he is conceptually non-reliant on outside things, he finds his properties to be immateriality and non-extension.

II.B. Functions of the Self

The Cartesian mind functions only in thinking and only insofar as it thinks. Thinking covers the entirety of commonly imagined mental life. A thinking thing “doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions” (19). Though a broad category, because they conceptually rely on materiality and extension, each property fits easily into the Cartesian mind. However, should the mind not act in any of these ways simultaneously, by Descartes’ own admission, “[he] should totally cease to exist” (18). This, albeit morbid, observation gives an insight to how the mind retains identity over time. If a person ceases to exist when she ceases to think, she existed through thinking (obviously), but this tells us that she would be distinguishable or unique by her unique total stream of consciousness; if someone existed until they stopped thinking, then the entirety of their thought would be them; therefore, people retain unique identities via unbroken stream of thought.

II.C. Relations with the Self

Descartes ultimately does not believe that the mind exists alone, without any other true concepts, instead providing a proof of their existence. This reintroduces physical concepts and specifically that of the physical body. The body relays sensory perceptions to the mind while the mind controls the body, animating it. This relationship is special to the point where, by way of analogy, Descartes invites in an idea of a union or “intermingling” of the body and mind, but Descartes nonetheless makes it very clear that “I am really distinct from my body¹” because of the contingent nature of this relationship shown in section II.A (54).

¹ I think the way in which Descartes talks about the body is important as well. He almost always refers to it as “my body” or in some other possessive fashion – as a sailor would of his ship. It is always “I ... would not feel pain when the body was hurt.” This is not to say that Descartes thought the mind was disinterested with the body, he was

III. Elisabeth's Concerns

It is this relationship that sparks worry for Elisabeth. Elisabeth accepts the mind and body to be distinct but finds it inconceivable that an immaterial non-extended thing can move a material extended thing. She identifies three ways in which the movement of bodies is determined, first by impulsion, second by the way the thing that pushes, pushes, and third by the properties of the thing that pushes. These methods are incompatible with immaterial substances as “physical contact is required for the first two conditions, extension for the third” and these properties – the ability to have physical contact and extension – an immaterial non-extended substance naturally can't have (Elisabeth 62). Thus, Elisabeth is perplexed, if the mind cannot satisfy the conditions to cause movement, how does Descartes suppose it does anyways?

IV. Descartes' Response

The response Descartes gives depends heavily on unique properties of the union, and sensory experience. I find his argument to be this:

1. Either an immaterial mind moves the body, a material mind moves the body, or a quasi-material union of the mind and body moves the body, or it does not at all.
2. An immaterial mind cannot normally move matter.
3. The properties of the mind determine it immaterial.
4. The mind moves the body.
5. Therefore, a quasi-material union of the mind and body moves the body.

very adamant that we ought to treat the body as valuable, but I think it best to imagine this union as a symbiotic one.

Premise 1 can be implicitly found throughout their correspondence in the various options they consider. Option 1 is attacked directly by Elisabeth; option 2 is suggested by Elisabeth; option 3 is suggested by Descartes; finally, option 4 is considered in his *Meditations* and discussed in his letters. The following premises rule out all the options except 3.

Premise 2 deals with the capabilities of the mind. Elisabeth argues that the mind cannot move matter, and Descartes seems to, in most cases, agree. The mind cannot, no matter how hard it tries, push a chair, or anything outside of its body. Only the body, which “more than any other, belonged to me,” can Descartes move (52). Were it capable of impulsion upon anything or were the body not a special case, we would find it to be a common property of the mind. But because it is not, the immaterial mind can be considered generally incapable of moving matter. This eliminates option 1.

The evidence for premise 3 can be found once again in section II.A. To reiterate, because the mind is non-dependent on (or separable from) material, extended reality, it must not be itself material. This eliminates option 2.

It is premise 3 that Descartes mainly focuses on in his reply. After Elisabeth is initially unconvinced, going so far as to suppose physicalism. Observe his suggestion to Elisabeth: he says, “I beg [you] to feel free to attribute this matter and this extension to the soul” (Elisabeth 71). This seems, initially outrageous and contradictory.² An immaterial thing can’t be material. However, he is not advocating her to *believe* the mind is physical, he is just attempting to get her ‘into the right state of mind’, as it were. Because by imagining it a physical thing, Descartes hopes Elisabeth will more easily “conceive it as united with the body” and thus “experience it

² I borrow this reaction and heavily in the commentary in this section from Alison Simmons’ Paper, *Mind-Body Union and the Limits of Cartesian Metaphysics* (27).

within herself” (Elisabeth 71). ‘It’ being the actual union of the mind and body or, to put it another way, the casual power of the mind onto the body. Then, having sensed the actual workings of the mind interfacing with the body, she can now remove the properties of materiality and extension from her concept of the mind. He is, to summarize, asking her to simply observe the mind moving the body, thus eliminating option 4.

By demonstrating this, Descartes may move onto the conclusion: the union, or the special relationship between specifically a mind and a body, must have the necessary prerequisites (whatever they may be) to have mental impulses move the body.

V. A Valid Argument

The response Descartes gives is a valid argument. The argument does directly respond to Elisabeth’s concern. Instead, it sidesteps the concern. She was worried that the mind did not have the requisite properties to move a body, but in merely showing that it does move the body, Descartes may attribute to the union the requisite property. Consequently, he says, “I believe that we have heretofore confused the notion of the power with which the soul acts on the body with the power with which one body acts on another” (Elisabeth 66). The exact power or method with which the mind moves the body is, as far as he is concerned, is unknown to him: he just knows the power exists and exists within the mind.

The mystery power maintains the functionality of his system. The mind alone cannot move matter, or the body, but enmeshing it with the body in a union, delivers ‘emergent’ properties or powers.

VI. Objections and Replies

I consider two similar objections. First, the union seems to be an obscure concept, conjured by Descartes to wave away issues he can't think of a satisfactory solution to. Second, this argument provides no positive explanation of what happened; it is very weak. I think both objections are answered along the same vein. That being, by reference to the strength of his initial metaphysics and the strength of our perception.

Descartes' solution to Elisabeth's concern does not posit any positive reason why this specific understanding of the mind is valuable or reasonable. As I have said, the response *maintains* functionality. The power of Descartes' system is found in its formulation of the soul and body, by how it finds the properties of the soul. The system of doubt he uses (described in II.A.) gives him enough reason to believe in his distinction of mind and body. Moreover, the union is not simply a band-aid solution. When we consider our own mentality and our own soul, it certainly *feels* like 'we' are controlling our bodies; in pre-philosophical reflection, we certainly clearly perceive we are in interface with our bodies. It makes the most sense then, considering that Descartes believes that "as a general rule ... whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true," that this union be actually real (24).

VII. Conclusion

Therefore, I find I have sketched René Descartes' full conception of the self and shown how his response to Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia's is satisfactory.

Works Cited

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