

Explanation of the Mind-Body Problem from Descartes' Perspective

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Abstract: Human is composed of mind and body. The principal attribute of human mind is thinking and the principal attribute of body is dimension or extension. Mind and body are two completely distinct and independent substances. The mind is seated in the pineal gland and via that interacts with the body, is unified with it and survives the death of the body. The present article first deals with an argument for the existence of body as well as an explanation of the self-evidence of knowing the mind and then deals with a critique and analysis of the mind-body problem and the interaction between the two.

Key words: Mind • Thought • Corporeal quality • Mind-body interaction • Mind-body distinction

INTRODUCTION

Being two independent substances, mind and body are completely distinct; for mind is a thinking and non-extended substance, but body is extended and non-thinking. Thus, even if there were no body, the mind would exist as it exists now and similarly if there were no mind, body would have been as it is now, for each of these substances are independent and self-subsistent. However, their union and association are not detrimental to their independence; thus, these two substances, though independent and distinct, are unified and form a complete unit called human being; they affect each other, so that mind cannot act without a body and body cannot persist without a mind.

The Existence Of the Material Body

First Argument: Imagination and sensation have no connection and link with reality; rather, they are distinct from the reality of the mind. For I can know myself with thorough clarity and distinction without any such faculties as imagination and sensation; that is, if I as a thinking being had no imagination or sensation, I would still have the ability to know the reality of myself immediately. We can consider imagination and sensation on two bases; one is on the basis that they do not interfere with the reality of my mind and the other is on the basis that they are considered variants of thought and intellection. In the former, imagination and sensation are completely distinct from my mind, yet in the latter, they subsist through my mind; in the former, these

attributes do not exist in my soul or mind as an immaterial substance, so they must exist in another substance which is completely distinct and separate from the reality of my mind and definitely the substance that is totally distinct and separate from my mind is my body, i.e. it is a part of the human being. Thus, my material body exists in the world outside my mind [1]

Second Argument: Even without the faculties of movement and adapting to circumstances, my mind is still the same immaterial and thinking substance. Since the faculties of movement and adapting to circumstances do not exist in the essence and reality of my mind, they must belong to a substance distinct and separate from it; for the implication of the foresaid powers entails a kind of extension which is the principal attribute of the matter and not the mind. Therefore, the faculties of movement and adapting to circumstances must subsist in a substance which is distinct of and separate from, the reality of my mind and this distinct and separate substance is my material body as an extended substance. Thus, body must exist in the world outside my mind so as to include the foresaid faculties [2].

Third Argument: The passive faculty of sensation exists in the mind and essence as a distinct substance, but we must note that mind can never use the foresaid faculty unless there is another faculty as well; a faculty with which mind can use the passive faculty of sensation is the active faculty. Thus, existence of an active faculty is necessary for the utilization of a passive faculty; yet the

said active faculty cannot exist in my mind, for it has no relevance too implication with incorporeity and thought. Since the active faculty does not exist in my mind as a spiritual and thinking substance, it must exist in another substance which is totally distinct and separate from my mind; thus, the body exists outside the world of human mind as a separate and distinct substance (idem, 101).

Explanation of the Self-Evidence of Our Knowledge of Our Body: In the view of Descartes, “the knowledge we have of our mind not only is prior to and more certain than the knowledge of our body, but is also more evident; so that even if there were no body, the knowledge of our mind would remain the same” [1]. While acknowledging the self-evidence of the knowledge of mind, Descartes poses two arguments for its proof.

First Argument: What revealed to me by the natural light is that it is impossible for an attribute to come from nothingness; rather it must be substantive and the natural light within me clearly shows that the more attributes we find in a substance, the clearer is our knowledge of it. And I can find more attributes in my mind, for I am more aware of my mind than other objects. Thus my knowledge of my mind is more self-evident than my knowledge of my body. “The natural light in my mind clearly reveals that no quality or attribute comes from nothingness and if we encounter a specific quality or attribute, there must inevitably exist an underlying object or a substance to which they belong. And this natural light reveals that the more attributes we observe in an object or a substance, the more will be our knowledge of them; we find more attributes in our mind than in anything else” (idem, 234).

Second Argument: Human beings have a purpose for knowing any object and the purpose of knowing objects is to become more certain of the immaterial mind; for it may be that objects do not exist in the world outside my mind and I might have been deceived; still, I as the knower them exist, a fortiori.

“The motivation for knowing anything we can conceive is always a reason for becoming more certain of our mind; for instance, if I judge that the earth exists from the fact that I can touch it or see it, this very fact undoubtedly gives even greater support for the judgment that my mind exists; for it may perhaps be the case that I judge that I am touching the earth even though the earth

does not exist at all; but it cannot be that, when I make this judgment, my mind which is making the judgment does not exist” (idem, 234).

Mind-Body Distinction: The immaterial mind and the material body are two distinct and independent substances, meaning that these two have opposing nature and reality. The reality of the mind is thought and intellect, whereas the reality of the body is extension; in other words, the mind is thinking and non-extended, but the body is extended and non-thinking, for “we call two substances really distinct when each of them is able to exist independent of the other” [3]. Thus, “the nature of mind and matter is different and there is no association between the two” [4]. Accordingly, “Descartes did not consider soul as the substance of life and believed that we can exist without mind, but we cannot have awareness”. Thus “Descartes reveals two parallel yet independent worlds, one of which is the world of the mind and the other is the world of the matter each of which can be studied without the other” [5]. Descartes poses an argument for proving the mind-body distinction:

Argument Statement: “I am totally certain of my existence; I have discovered this principle from methodological doubt and I am certain that I am nothing but a thinking thing; i.e. my nature is nothing but thought and intellect and I know for sure that I see nothing in myself which would necessarily belong to my essence and quiddity but thought and intellect. Therefore, my essence and quiddity is purely thinking and intellection and nothing else and thought and intellect are the entire nature and reality of my essence and mind. I thus have a clear and distinct notion of my mind which is merely thinking and non-extended and I have a clear and distinct notion of my body which is merely extended and possesses no thought nor intellect; and a non-extended thinking substance, though may be associated with a specific thing like the material mind, depends on no object for its existence and quiddity and no object is necessary or essential for its persistence; for the thinking substance can exist without a body and continue its spiritual and intellectual life, and needs no material place or object for its existence. Therefore, the mind is completely distinct of the body and knowing the mind is easier than knowing the body; even if there were no body, the mind would have been as it is.”

Mind-Body Unity: The immaterial mind is seated in the pineal gland and via that interacts and coacts with the body; thus, although the mind and the body interact within a particular organ, it does not imply that the mind is merely united with the said gland; but quite contrarily, the mind does not unite with any particular member, rather it unites with the whole body.

Argument Statement: The immaterial mind is united with the whole body. To prove the unity between the immaterial mind and the material body we can say that: Nature has clearly and explicitly taught me that I have a body and whenever I feel pain it indicates that my body is harmed. Now the question that arises here is what causes pain in me? Is it my body that senses pain or is it the mind?

What senses pain and harm is not my material body, for my body is an extended substance and never thinks; therefore what senses pain must be my mind, for its reality and nature is nothing but thought and intellection. Accordingly, my mind senses whatever pain inflicted on me and this is the very reason why my body and mind are unified and unitary while at the same time being distinct and opposing.

And also the nature itself has taught me that whenever I feel hunger or thirst, it implies my body's need for food and water and not my mind's; for my mind is immaterial and not corporeal. Thus, this is my body - the extended substance - that requires food and water to persist and not my mind. Whenever my body needs food or water, my mind senses hunger or thirst and I eat or drink to quench my thirst or hunger and this is why the body and mind, though essentially independent and substantially opposing, are united with one another.

"There is nothing in my mind that resembles matter and vice versa. Yet, existential and phenomenological experiences lead us to believe that these two have some kind of an internal connection" [4]. Thus "he believes that there is a quasi-existential unity between the mind and the body" [6].

Mind-Body Interaction: In the view of Descartes, the immaterial mind is totally distinct from the body. After explaining the distinction between the immaterial mind and the material body and after explaining the unity between the two, the question arises that what benefit is there to the unity of the immaterial mind and the material body? In

other words, is it not better for mind and body to still be distinct of each other and never become united or interact with one another?

In medieval thoughts, the mind was considered as the form of the body, while in the view of Descartes, it is not the case; rather the immaterial mind and the material body are totally independent and distinct of each other. Independence of mind and body and their existential distinction are due to the essence and quiddity each possesses; i.e. each of them possesses a principal attribute that is essentially contrary to that of the other, so that these two attributes cannot come together in a single object. The principal attribute of the mind is thought and the principal attribute of the body is extension. Thought and extension not only have no congruity, but they also discard one another and mind and body are distinct from and contrary to one another due to the opposition of their principal attributes.

The mind-body distinction makes each of them independent and maintains each one's identity. If the mind and the body were not distinct due to their principal attributes, they might have contributed to the view of rejection of incorporeity and survival of the soul; yet this distinction and independence on one hand underlines the incorporeity of the mind and on the other hand seconds the view that mind will survive the death of the body and that its infinity will never be jeopardized by death or decay.

However, the mind-body independence prior to the separation of soul from the body and its decay bears no fruit for a human composed of the immaterial mind and the material body unless these two substances are united; for the mind acquires spiritual values merely through body and via that achieves its worthy perfection and body can persist only through the existence of the mind. It is necessary for the mind and the body to be united for achieving their goals and intentions and it is only based on this hypothesis that we can justify and interpret mind's stimulation of body organs and inner desires and feelings.

Lavine's Arguments Against Mind-Body Interaction

First Argument: The first problem with mind-body interaction is that Descartes "argues that there is an interaction between the mind and the body since the mind is mostly located in the pineal gland and performs its mental functions there, yet there is no evidence regarding

pineal gland being involved in such functions” [6]. Thus, mind-body interaction is merely a theory and has not been proven by physiologists.

Counterargument: In the view of Descartes, the immaterial mind and the material body interact through the pineal gland, but he has explained this notion with the rational sense and physiological evidences of his time. Although at the present time, the functions of the said gland has not been proven, it may be that later with the advancement of medical sciences, its functions will be made clear, especially with regards to mediating the interaction of the immaterial mind and the material body.

Second Argument: The mind-body interaction theory “cannot explain how an immaterial non-extended mind can affect a part of the brain and how the corporeal or material pineal gland can affect the immaterial mind” (idem, 77). Thus, Descartes has defined the pineal gland as a medium and a place where the thinking mind and the extended body interact, which is not valid.

Counterargument: Neither the immaterial mind nor the material body affect the pineal gland, rather through the pineal gland they affect each other. In other words, the pineal gland mediates their effect on one another; since an extended substance and a non-extended substance cannot directly and immediately affect each other and interact, they need a medium through which to do so.

Third Argument: The mind-body interaction theory is that which according to mechanical rules, believes that any change in objects or material affairs has a corporeal and material cause, whereas if my material body can move or make changes in the immaterial mind, it must be, just like the material mind, subject to the laws of motion.

Now if the immaterial mind is subject to the laws of motion and the science of mechanics, as with the material body, human mind and soul can no longer be spiritual and immaterial and as a result be considered independent and distinct from the body; rather it must be considered as something material, while Descartes regards the mind to be immaterial: “if my body can make changes in the mind through the pineal gland, then my mind is subject to the laws of motion of the body and becomes a part of the clock-like mechanics of the body. Therefore, interaction removes, like an immaterial substance, the mechanistic laws of science and the independence of mind” (idem, 177).

Counterargument: The mind, though independent and substantive, affects the body though the pineal gland and the body too affects the mind despite being independent and substantive. Therefore their mutual influence does not blemish their individual distinction and independence.

Incorporeity, Distinction and the Survival of the Soul: The principal attribute of human mind and soul is thinking and intellection and the principal attribute of the body is dimension or extension in the three dimensions of length, width and depth. That is to say, the human mind merely thinks and has no extension, while the body is merely extended and does not think [8]. Therefore we can say that the mind and the body are essentially distinct and contrary, so that human mind can, as stated in religious teachings and truths of faith, survive the death of the material body, the decay of corporeal flesh and bones and continue its existence.

The reason is that the principal attribute of the mind is thinking and intellection and thought is of the properties of an immaterial substance and the immaterial substance does not need the body for its occurrence and survival. Yet, since human is a composite of the two substances, it is necessary for them to interact as long as the composite persists, otherwise their composition will be vain.

Argument Statement: If the mind is distinct from the body it will not be mortal. But the mind is distinct from the body, so the mind will survive the death of the body; for “mind is the essential attribute of my nature. I can imagine myself without a body and can conceive that there is no universe, but I cannot conceive that the “I” that conceives everything does not exist. This statement defines the dualistic doctrine of Descartes regarding the mind and the matter; based on that, corporeity, survival and immortality of the mind is valid” [9].

Human being is composed of the mental and bodily substances none of which is a part of the other; rather, they are completely distinct from and independent of each other and since the mind is not a part of the body, it can survive the death of the body and continue its existence. To prove the survival of the mind after its separation from the material body, Descartes resorts to the following reasons. That the Creator of the mind and the body is God and it is upon Him to answer the foresaid question; He has done so and the answer has been communicated to us by Prophets, i.e. God has sent His revelations to humans

via his messengers that the human soul - due to being immaterial and distinct from the body -will never die or decay after the death of the body, but it will rather stay in the hereafter forever and will continue to exist. Thus, there is no doubt that human soul will survive the death and decay of the body [3].

CONCLUSION

In the view of Descartes, human being is composed of two substances, namely the mind and the body. To prove the existence of the body, he makes use of his internal faculties and functions such as imagination, sensation, movement, etc. While acknowledging the self-evidence of knowing the mind, he poses some arguments and after proving the existence of the body and the mind, presents reasons for proving the distinction, unity and interaction between the two and answers the arguments against the interaction theory. In the end, he deals with proving that soul survives the death of the body. He considers thought and intellection as the principal attribute of the mind; thought is an attribute of the immaterial substance and does not need the body for its occurrence and survival. Since human is a composite of mind and body, as long as this composite persists and until the mind has not departed the body, there is an interaction between the two or otherwise the notion of composition would have been futile. Having a body is not an essential attribute of mine and I can conceive myself as having no body, while I continue to exist as a thinking being.

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