

Relationship between mind and body



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The relationship between the mind and body has been a preoccupation among philosophers since the Greek antiquity, with famous writers such as 5th Century philosopher Plato, and his student Aristotle. Ideas concerning the mind and body originate as far back as Plato's and Aristotle's time, whereby they questioned whether or not intelligence is connected with the body. In the 16th Century, Michel de Montaigne treated the same question again, and it was then continued in the 17th Century but by René Descartes and Blaise Pascal.

Their point of view is diverse and the conclusion that they reach upon at times is somewhat in a way satisfying to each other or plain rejects. Before embarking on the essay, a brief explanation on their works will be examined.

Michel de Montaigne was one of the most influential yet sceptical writers of the 16th Century, especially with his *Essais* being a compilation of various short topics describing man and human nature. His essays had direct influence on other classical thinkers such as René Descartes and Blaise Pascal.

Blaise Pascal was not only an influential French philosopher, but he was also a French mathematician and physicist. His unfinished most famous work in philosophy, *Pensées*, is a series of philosophical sections and essays, whereby Pascal identifies and explores the contradictions of human nature with regards to psychology and sociology. Pascal used his personal thoughts and opinions concerning human suffering and religious beliefs to write this philosophy towards the close of his life.

French philosopher, but also a mathematician and scientist René Descartes, had published two well known philosophical works in history called *Discours de la Méthode* and *Méditations Métaphysiques*. Descartes main goal was to present us with a series of thoughts that he took into consideration, in order to shed light on his views on God and the existence.

Réne Descartes was, by nature a dualist. In fact, he created the notion of Cartesian dualism and was the first person to clearly classify the mind with consciousness and to differentiate this from the brain, which held intelligence. Cartesian dualism viewed that one's intelligence cannot be touched and is non-physical. He was the first to create the mind and body problem, an issue which tried to question how the mind and body can interact, especially if the mind is based solely on thought and the body is purely an addition. This was the basic breadth of the mind-body debate which began during the times of Plato and Aristotle and extended long past Descartes's death.

Aristotle believed mind was connected to the soul. The mind is the souls's object, which becomes active only when it thinks. The soul, which is also known as the intellect, does not work unless it is thinking. Therefore, it is unlikely that it would be mixed with the body. Aristotle was therefore a thinker who was more concerned with the metaphysical concepts. Plato's thought was more based on concrete principles of the natural world. While Aristotle described the levels of reality, Plato focused on subjects such as how one could be of a righteous character, and therefore a better person within themselves. Cartesian dualism permits both these theories to work together in order to be recognised as one.

Descartes, like Montaigne and Pascal to some extent, were philosophers who all had different ways of going about their works. Descartes used more indirect means of philosophising. Meanwhile, Pascal would have been purposely direct and informative, as a mathematician who drew on his knowledge of the sciences in order to develop his conclusions. On the other hand, Montaigne studied himself with subjects such as religion, philosophy, humanism as he believed this was crucial in order to describe human nature.

These three Frenchmen contrasted with their views regarding the mind and the body. While Descartes thought that the mind was separate from the body, Montaigne along with Pascal definitely would have argued that the mind was part of the physical body. Obviously, there are good arguments for and against these two very different views, which will be explained.

Montaigne preferred to make his opinions clear by providing facts in order to attempt to uncover the truth, providing the readers a chance to analyse his thoughts personally. His aim was to describe man and human nature by using memory as a description to address his topic. This is what he did to highlight his view on the mind and body. He argued that the development of the mind is connected to the body and expressed how he believed the imagination is the drive for the downfall of the body. His philosophy regarding these two substances is one of which explains his view that a healthy mind comes from the studies of other great writers. “ L’ame que loge la philosophie doit, par sa santé, rendre sain encores le corps.” (Montaigne: 208: 1969) He argues that anyone who is taught by the philosophy of past great writers will have the perfect body, as he believes thinking for oneself is truly unhealthy for the body and mind. Therefore, according to him there is

only one type of education which should be used, based purely on thoughts of the past to achieve both a healthy body and mind.

In order to transform a child to becoming a well formed healthy man, there should be a connection between the mind and body. Throughout *De L'institution des enfants* Montaigne proves his opinions for training both body and mind and therefore the tutor is responsible for this training as “ ce n'est pas assez de luy roidir l'ame; il luy faut ausi roidir les muscles.” (Montaigne: 201: 1969) When training the body, two advantages appear. Firstly, the mind is able to relax and secondly the body is able to build itself for the prevention of illnesses. Therefore, the mind cannot work unless the body has been trained.

Furthermore, “ tout lieu retiré requiert un proumenoir. Mes pensees dorment, si je les assis. Mon esprit ne va pas seul, comme si les jambes l'agitent. Ceux qui estudient sans livre, en sont tous là.” (Montaigne: 76: 1993) Even though he was distracted by his books, he persists that one cannot achieve the pleasure of reading unless our mind and body are exercised in the correct manner. “ There is a healthy regime of the mind no less than of the body, and in fact the two are inseparable. An inquiring mind will be just as active as a healthy body in the pursuit of its interests.” (O'Neill: 101: 2001)

According to Montaigne, it is common for one to believe that the mind operates in a different manner to the body. But, “ even the active life of the body is inseparable from intelligence which itself is not exercised simply by closing one's eyes.” (O'Neill: 101: 2001) Thus, one should not separate these

two elements. We can understand that Montaigne fully believes in this connection.

Descartes was able to make complex philosophical concepts simple by breaking them down into manageable pieces. This is what he tried to do with the mind and body problem in order to insist that they are two unique substances, with the mind being regarded as a non-physical element, without connecting to the body. He therefore believed that he could live without the mind.

Secondly, that the mind and the body may be dissimilar but they do interact. Nevertheless, he understands that this relationship is not ideal in that “ d’où il est entièrement manifeste que, nonobstant la souveraine bonté de Dieu, la nature de l’homme, en tant qu’il est composé de l’esprit et du corps, ne peut qu’elle ne soit quelquefois fautive et trompeuse. ” (Descartes: 89: 1992) The mind and body are surely two separate things in some senses of the word, but Descartes could have seamlessly made these two entities dualist aspects that can and must be separated.

This is because intelligence comes from a place which cannot be defined. One cannot control the human mind and simply confine it to the body, because intelligence is completely separate from one’s physical capabilities. For example, if one were to be paralysed from the neck down, Descartes would argue that the mind would still be unharmed. Similarly, someone could be unconscious but their brainwaves could still be functioning well. Since he believed in the power of the mind and intelligence, he was a deep thinker.

Descartes argues, “ qu’il y a une grande différence entre l’esprit et le corps, en ce que le corps, de sa nature, est toujours divisible, et que l’esprit est entièrement indivisible.... je considère mon esprit, c’est-à-dire moi-même en tant que je suis seulement une chose qui pense, je n’y puis distinguer aucunes parties, mais je me conçois comme une chose seule et entière.... l’esprit semble être uni à tout le corps, toutefois un pied...ou quelque autre partie étant séparée de mon corps, il est certain que pour cela il n’y aura rien de retranché de mon esprit. ” (Descartes: 86: 1992) Descartes disputes that the mind and body are separable, and argues that the mind is different to the body and therefore one can exist without the use of the other. Furthermore, to clarify this argument, Descartes gives an explanation of the body. If man loses a limb or part of their body, they have not lost the mind. According to Descartes, the mind is the core element that makes him aware that he exists.

His well known philosophical quotation “ je pense donc je suis” (Descartes: 110: 2000) is connected to this theory of dualism as it forms the basis of it. According to him, we exist due to the fact that we think. He realises that he has a working mind, without being entirely sure that he has a body. The combination of mind and body presents Descartes’ views of a “ genuine human being” (Cottingham: 7: 1999). He realised that a problem could not simply be analysed on the common sense level. Moreover, his statement “ c’est-a-dire l’ame par laquelle je suis ce que je suis, est entierement distincte du corps,” (Descartes : 111 : 2000) can “ assert that the soul is the fundamental self, in contrast to the Thomist thesis that a human being is essentially a composite of body and soul.” (Moriarty : 142: 2003) It is

possible for one to doubt everything from God to one's body, but it is not possible for one to deny the fact that there is a consciousness, which led him to this famous motto. He realised doubting the truth would be the only manner in which he would find out what was essentially true regarding the mind and body. However, he managed to put this aside and found one true belief, " cogito ergo sum." (Descartes: 110: 2000.

His belief in God is strong, as he believes God is all-powerful. This enables him to believe that anything he wishes to visualise is without a doubt possible. If he can prove God's existence, then he will be able to confirm other truths in life. Since the mind and body can be considered clearly as separate, it means that it is possible for God to make it happen.

Descartes is not exactly clear on the connection between mind and body, but we can deduce from his work that he did not think they were related. Even though this was the case, he still " discusses at some length the nature of the union of the human mind with ' its' body." (Wilson: 177: 1982)

Most likely, Descartes would take a roundabout way at arriving at his conclusions. First, he would take an abstract concept, by using the mind and intelligence as a kind of springboard for talking about other subjects more liberally. Then, he would continue to use evidence to back up his theoretical reasoning, probably using more abstractions to support his theoretical concept. Finally, he would wrap up in summation by using some concrete examples of what he was talking about in abstract terms.

He believed in what he thought made him who he was. " Un autre est de penser; et je trouve ici que la pensée est un attribut qui m'appartient : elle

seule ne peut être détachée de moi.” (Descartes : 2000 : 25) not so with Pascal, who could clearly distinguish between the thought processes and separate that out from himself.

Pascal, who preferred making explanations about various aspects of reality difficult and layered it with complicated aspects of knowledge argued against the dualist, and easily made the reverse of the mind and body argument. According to him, doubt could only lead to more doubt. He believed that one could not explain one’s existence through reasoning and that man is mostly guided by beliefs and feelings. Therefore, the only solution and help is faith. One can only gain certain knowledge through obedience to God. He also confirmed that one may not be able to use his mind due to a certain reason, but yet his body would be kept physically alive. “ Je puis bien concevoir un homme sans mains, pieds, tete, car ce n’est que l’experience qui nous apprend que la tete est plus necessaire que les pieds. Mais je ne puis concevoir l’homme sans pensee. Ce serait une pierre ou une brute. ” (Pascal: 107: 2000) Therefore, it would seem that the mind and body definitely would be connected. Pascal also believed in the power of the mind, but his focus was more on the physical and the reality of the body. The body is a concrete substance, and empirical in the sense that its functions can be measured and regulated.

In his implications, he will find religious yet ethnical views to explain the mind and body problem. For instance he quotes “ toute notre dignite consiste donc en la pensee. C’est de là qu’il faut nous relever, et non de l’espace et de la duree, que nous ne saurions remplir. Travaillons donc a bien penser. Voila le principe de la morale.” (Pascal: 171: 2000) It is possible to

note his stress on morality here as he wants to acknowledge the suffering of human existence that could be found from these two non-connecting substances.

Pascal would have been much more of a mathematical thinker. He thought in a linear fashion, and his arguments were in relation to geometry theorems. First, Pascal would begin with one argument and then logically make sure the other arguments followed in a linear sequence. For example, he would take one statement which would be his main idea. Next, Pascal would most likely support this idea with relevant evidence and facts. He would clearly and succinctly make his case as for why the mind and the body were one and the same element.

Pascal was primarily concerned with the differences between the intuitive mind and the mathematical mind. In some ways, this would have been the difference between Descartes, Pascal and Montaigne.

The mind and the body are surely two separate things in some senses of the word, but Descartes could have seamlessly made these two entities dualist aspects that can and must be separated. Pascal and Montaigne would have no doubt argued in the contra, that the mind and body are ultimately one and the same.

However, any philosopher would see that all three philosophers would have had equally valid arguments in trying to convince people of their view. Each philosopher had very valid points about their own positions that would lend relevance to each of their particular theories.

Pascal saw himself as a defender of Christianity, whilst Descartes knew himself as purely a philosopher. Without question, Pascal did take into consideration Descartes belief on the mind and body, but he did not believe that Cartesian Dualism was between the soul and the body, but instead between the infinity of God and sin of men. Montaigne accepted that the mind and body were connected, but should be used in the correct manner in order to work efficiently.

Yet, all three thinkers share opinions regarding the creation of human and with this we can discover how they both have certain views in common. They both consider human beings as having a body, mind and thought, and because of this, Pascal regard man as “ un Roseau pensant.” (Pascal: 171: 2000) They also realise that the mind and consciousness can encompass the body.

These philosophers were all thinkers who looked at the world from their own perspectives and tried to make sense of their worlds. They tried using reason in order to make deductions and educated guesses, making sure to try their hardest to come to logical conclusions.

As we can see, the relationship between the mind and body as conceived by all three philosophers vary. Both Montaigne and Pascal believe in the connection of the mind and the body, but Descartes does not. Pascal was hugely influenced by Montaigne’s writings and this could be the reason why they shared more of the same thoughts. Descartes was also influenced by the works of Montaigne, but had more of an influence from Aristotle and Plato. Both Montaigne and Pascal were sceptics and therefore questioned

and rejected ideas of their times, which resulted in doubt. But whilst Montaigne did not find this a problem, Pascal did as he was over whelmed with religious doubts.

Alternatively, Montaigne and Descartes differed because Descartes strongly agreed with the dualist view that the mind and body are independent substances. But, all three philosophers argued in favour of God's existence. For Montaigne, he argued religion and human values through sceptic philosophy and doubt, Descartes through doubt and Pascal through faith.

Descartes chose to understand that the mind must be separate from the body and therefore, intelligence was a nonphysical entity. Pascal and Montaigne thought intelligence and the mind were part of the body and also the same.

In that sense, all three men were classically trained philosophical thinkers who followed in the footsteps of their predecessors by rationally deducing logical and well-thought-out arguments. Each of these men should be revered for their great contributions to society.

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