

Descartes' mind-body problem

Philosophy



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In Meditations I, Descartes conceives that he is “ A thinking thing,” and this is based on his reasoning that there must be something that exists that is producing the meditations that arise in his awareness (Descartes 137). Descartes maintains that this reasoning solves the initial doubts that were addressed in Meditation I. He then becomes aware of the problem that although one can be certain that a thinking thing exists, one cannot be sure that there is the existence of a body.

Descartes then goes on to explain the relationship between the thinking thing and the corporeal body, in order to address the problem that arises when he concludes that he is “ A thinking thing. ” Descartes concludes that there is a definite distinction between the mind and the body. This conclusion is based on the same kind of first-person reasoning that he used in all of his Meditations. That is, when he uses the term, “ I,” he is referring to himself as the thinking thing, and he assumes that this same mode of thought can be used for every “ I” or thinking thing in the world.

His fundamental argument that he believes proves the distinction between mind and body is as follows: I have a clear and distinct conception of the mind as a thinking, non-physical thing and I have a clear and distinct conception of the body as a material, non-reflective thing, so the mind is truly separate from the body and can be completely independent from it (Descartes 177). Descartes goes on to say that there is a peculiarity of the thinking thing's association with material bodies.

The sensations convey material things to me, one of which is a material body that appears to have an exceptionally close connection to me—the corporeal body that I regard as my own. Descartes refers to his own body, in which he

says that this particular body, " which...I called my own, pertained to me more properly and strictly than any of the others; for in truth, I could never be separated from it as from other bodies: I felt in it and on account of it all my appetites and affections, and in fine I was affected in its parts by pain and titillation of pleasure, and not in the parts of the other bodies that were separated from it." (Descartes 174).

When Descartes uses the term " human being," he means that it is a special correlation between the thinking thing and the corporeal body, and this leads to the mind-body problem which he addresses in Meditations VI. The questions that the mind-body problem deals with are as follows: how can two things that are absolutely distinct in nature, such as a thinking thing and a material body, each operating and operated upon in varying ways (notions vs. actions), be so closely associated with one another—an association that comprises a causal relationship between them?

Specifically, how can something that operates exclusively by reflecting or sensing bear influence on something that can be operated upon exclusively by being physically affected? Further, how can something that operates exclusively by being impactful bear influence on something that may be operated upon exclusively by way of perceiving? These fundamental questions are, essentially, the mind-body problem. Descartes' response to this problem consists of two parts.

The first is that Descartes maintains that an answer to this problem necessitates a clarification of the correlation between the mind and the body (Descartes 178-179). He says that there is a great difference between the mind and the body. The body can always be separated; it can be divided in

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parts. However, the mind cannot be separated or divided into parts (Descartes 178). Of course, this conclusion gives rise to the problem, that is, how can something which is indivisible (the mind) have effect on something that is divisible (the body)?

How can two things of different kinds of substances have a sort of causal relationship between each other? The second part of his response is that Descartes holds that the problem itself originates from the inaccurate presumption that two things with totally distinct proportions do not have the ability to operate upon one another. Descartes maintains that the mind and body do have abilities to operate upon one another, and that there is contact between the mind and the body (Descartes 179-180).

For example, if someone extends their hand near a flame, they will feel a sensation of heat, and there would be nerves within the body that communicates to the brain a sense of hotness, and the closer that that hand gets to the fire, the more the sensation of hotness will be felt within the mind. And the mind, therefore, will control the body's reaction to this sensation of heat. The mind can either force the hand to keep getting closer to the fire or the mind can force the hand to go away from the fire.

Descartes concludes that there is this causal relationship between the mind and the body (Descartes 180). In my opinion, Descartes addresses this issue quite well. I think that Descartes introduces a concept that is highly worthy of further scientific inquiry and experimentation. He thinks of something within the corporeal body—something that is now considered the pineal gland—and reasons that this particular thing has a lot to do with the relationship between the mind and body.

This substance, whether it be a physical substance or not, is responsible for nerves which connect something which is happening to the body with the mind, and something which is happening in the mind with the corporeal body. This hypothesis has given rise to the possibility that this thing might actually exist. And scientific exploration can only be underway if there is a hypothesis that prompts it. So, I would not dismiss Descartes' theory here, because of the possibility that science has actually proven the pineal gland's existence, and the pineal gland is responsible for exactly what Descartes is concluding here.