

Descartes arguments
for mind surviving the
bodys death
philosophy essay



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To return to the original problem, will I survive my death? First, what is meant by I? If it is going to survive my death, it is not my brain or body — it must be something non-physical, so being non-physical seems to be a precondition for surviving death. Descartes claimed that this precondition is met, that he knew he was non-physical, and he needed only to ask himself ‘Do I exist’ to prove it. By answering the question, he could discover the necessary and sufficient conditions for his existence, which could provide the basis for a definition of what he really was. And he knew he existed because he knew he was thinking, a fact he could not doubt, because if he ever tried to doubt his existence, he would at the same time be affirming it by thinking. On the other hand, his body was something whose existence he found he could doubt by positing an evil demon who fooled his mind into believing that he had a body. For all he knew, his mind could really be a potatoe with wires plugged in fooling it into believing that it was something that could be made into french fries. So his conclusion was: ‘I am a thinking thing’, and ‘I exist so long as I am thinking’ (note that it is not so long as I am breathing). The death of the body could not be the end of him, because it would be entirely possible for him to be aware of his thoughts without his body. In other words, he could very well wake up one day to find himself thinking without sensing his body. Therefore, the death of his body could not mean the end of his thoughts.

But in answering the question of what happens after death, Descartes creates even more problems, like where did the mind come from, where does it go after death, what does it think about, and so on. These questions,

however, are not ones we can really expect Descartes to answer. In fact, it is better that he did not try because they would be purely speculative.

However, the same does not go for his claims about our minds while we are alive, which are certainly answerable to our experience. Descartes was a dualist in that he believed in two distinct substances: mental and physical. For him our bodies were physical machines that operated by the laws of physics. For instance, a person moves her arm from a fire because the fire pulls on a string attached to her brain, which in turn pulls a string attached to her muscle causing it to contract, pulling in the arm. This is a deterministic explanation of the body, the kind of explanation we use to explain the movements of billiards balls. However, for Descartes, this was not the only cause of the body's movements; the mind also played a role. Descartes believed in minds that 'pulled the levers' of the body, which were located in the pineal gland, that in turn set off the body's responses. The 'levers' must be in the pineal gland, he argued, because it has a central location in the brain; it is not in the right side of the brain with a counterpart in the left like all other brain tissue. He claimed that this demonstrated its unique purpose as the sort of command center of the brain. (Gendler et al., 2008).

Aside from the fact that we know his claims of the pineal gland to be scientifically false, his argument raises the question of how the mind and body interact. Recall that Descartes argued that the body is essentially physical substance, whereas the mind is essentially mental substance. He gives the definition of physical as anything that takes up space (like the brain, but not the mind), and mental as anything that thinks. But it remains a curiosity how something that only thinks manages to pull levers.

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In *The Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle elegantly sums up the problem as a category mistake. First, he presents what he calls the official doctrine of Cartesian Dualism in three premises: (1) humans are made up of the two distinct substances of body and mind, (2) the two work in unison, and (3) it is possible that the mind will continue its existence after the body's death. Bodies have the properties of being externally observable, subject to the laws of physics, and extended in space. Minds on the other hand have none of these properties; their workings are not perceivable to the outside observer, they do not obey the laws of physics, and they do not occupy space. Thus, we have two parallel experiences in our lives, viz., what our minds experience and what our bodies experience. The experiences of our minds are intimately apparent to us, but the experiences of our bodies are fed to us through our senses. Therefore, our minds are 'inner' and our bodies are 'outer'. Ryle argues that this language of inner and outer leads dualists to the false assumption that we exist in two distinct ways. We exist as physical bodies, so we are made up of matter in space and experience time, but we also exist as minds that are made up of 'mental' substance. Mental substance does not exist in space but does experience time. Ryle refers to Descartes' hypothesis as 'the Ghost in the Machine', because it posits a mind that is not physical that is somehow trapped in a body that is. He points out that part of Descartes' evidence for the existence of a distinct mental substance is that 'mental' words such as 'deduction' or 'joke' do not correspond with any physical process, but only have a mental existence. However, he argues that Descartes' ignores this principle when he uses mechanical language such as cause, effect, and thing, in analyzing the mind's processes.

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So why is dualism a 'category mistake'? 'It represents the facts of mental life as if they belonged to one logical type or category (or range of types or categories), when they actually belong to another.' This notion of the category mistake is best explained through examples. For instance, it would be a category mistake to say that most watermelons are smart, or that most people are ripe in the spring. The mistakes in either of these statements are not factual inaccuracies, i. e., the first one is not false because most watermelons are stupid as opposed to smart, but they are categorical mistakes. 'Smart' and 'ripe' do not make sense when they are applied to the wrong category. Likewise, Descartes does not make sense when he applies 'cause' 'effect' and 'process' to both bodies and minds.

The implication of this criticism is not merely that Descartes' claim that the mind will detach from the body is implausible, but the idea that they somehow interacted in the first place is non-sensical. There cannot be two distinct substances that have a cause and effect relationship. This is important, because if we do not interact with our bodies at the present, then we cannot cease to interact with them upon dying. Because we do in fact cause our actions, that is, there is a relationship between body and mind, Ryle has proven that there is a deeper connection between thought and action than Descartes believed.

So Descartes is not justified in his explanation of the mind separating from the body at death, because he did not accurately describe their relationship in the first place. His categories of mental and physical substance are flawed. But if Descartes' explanation is not possible, then what is the true relationship?

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According to John Searle, the mind is a product of the physical brain. ‘

Consciousness

is a biological process like digestion, photosynthesis, or the secretion of bile.’ He claims that consciousness is causally reducible to brain processes, and as a result, there is no reason to assume that it is something other than the neurobiological brain processes that give rise to it. For him, consciousness is caused by biological processes, interacts with other biological processes, and is thus itself a biological process. Just like the biological process of the heart’s beating ends at death, so too does the biological process of consciousness.

I find his argument, more specifically the notion that my consciousness is the result of neurobiology, something difficult to accept on a personal level. Intuitively, the idea just does not sit well, and I think the reason is that the logic seems problematic. I agree with Searle that science gives us an understanding of how neurons can explain all of our behaviors. But there seems to be a leap from explaining behavior to explaining consciousness. Searle would respond that consciousness can only be explained in terms of behaviors. For instance, how can we describe anger without referring to behavior? It seems that the only way to describe anger is a state of mind where a person is prone to actions of violence, or yelling, or even increased heart rate and blood pressure, which are all physical phenomena. Yet there still seems to be something missing from the explanation, the tangibility of the anger experience. There is no rational basis for why I do not accept it, the only word I can think of is faith. In my opinion, science as a source of knowledge is not absolute. Although Descartes may have been wrong in his <https://assignbuster.com/descartes-arguments-for-mind-surviving-the-body-death-philosophy-essay/>

explanation of the mind-body relationship, he was correct in stating that knowledge of personal existence is epistemologically prior to knowledge gained through the senses, which includes knowledge of the brain.

Descartes' method of doubt truly does demonstrate that scientific knowledge, which is learnt exclusively from the senses, is susceptible to a degree of doubt (the evil demon scenario). Where I disagree with Descartes and agree with Searle, is that thinking is best understood as a biological process. A simple proof of this is that getting drunk clouds thinking. But no matter how much thinking gets clouded, there is still the same 'I' who is thinking. I, that everpresent 'me' experiencing thoughts, senses and feelings, is always present in any experience. As I stated earlier, there is no rational reason for me to believe that 'I' am not a product of my brain. But as Descartes' evil demon scenario demonstrates, believing that I am a product of my brain requires a leap of faith as well. So when I die, maybe I will continue thinking, and maybe I will not. Perhaps I will begin to experience things completely different than thoughts and sensations, experiences that are completely new. I see any claim that this is implausible because of our understanding of the mind just as baseless as the claim that science cannot explain the mind. Both require a leap of faith, and as a result, the only appropriate answer is that there is no answer.

But the questions where will I go, what will I think about, what will I do with my time, remain unanswered.

In this essay, I shall explain Descartes' views of the self as a thinking thing more in depth, and present criticisms against them. I will argue that these arguments do in fact succeed in showing that his views of the self are
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implausible, all except for the view that the self is not necessarily physical. I ultimately seek to demonstrate that any claims about what the self is, no matter how rational they might seem, are purely speculation and can have no real basis. But that is not to say that I, that everpresent 'me' experiencing my thoughts, senses and feelings, does not exist, on the contrary, that I exist is all I really know about 'me'. And Descartes' method of doubt truly does demonstrate that knowledge of my existence is epistemologically prior to knowledge of my brain. Thus, all arguments, whether meta-physical or scientific, are ultimately speculative. In my view, I might still be around after my body's death, for all I know, experiencing things other than thoughts, senses, and feelings, or even time and space. I, therefore, see any descriptive claims about the 'self' as bound to failure

This lead him to believe that he would survive his physical death as a thinking thing. that the I that is the true me He makes a division between the mind and the body, the brain included, between mental and physical substance respectively. But when my body dies and I survive, where do I go, what am I, and what will I be thinking about? In this essay, I will lay out Descartes' explanation of the mind, and try to use it to come up with potential answers he might give. I will then present an argument that the existence of Descartes' meta-physical mind is implausible, based on the lack of an explanation for how it interacts with the body . I shall argue that this argument shows that Descartes' view of the mind is implausible, but not all of it.

There is still the soul, the I from Descartes' cogito that remains. It is prior to our knowledge of the brain epistemologically, so we cannot use arguments <https://assignbuster.com/descartes-arguments-for-mind-surviving-the-bodys-death-philosophy-essay/>

based the brain to prove or disprove it. So does it survive our deaths? My answer is I don't know, and the same goes for questions about where we go or what we think about.