

Neuroscience and dualism

Psychology



Why has the gap between science and the spirit become so broadened? Why have we escaped the desire to explain natural phenomenon on a spiritual stage? Further, what is it that would make one take a comprehension of neuroscience and turn that knowledge into a device used to disprove the existence of a soul? What if neuroscience is the natural but spiritual structure of what makes human consciousness possible? Can that be disproved? For me the answer is no and the linkage between these two ideas is only rational to consider. When you ponder what exactly it is that creates the autonomous characteristics of our being, you may find yourself, as I did, confused that there exist a difference between these two ideas to begin with. One may say that our soul consists of our consciousness or the ability to rationalize, use proper reason, and make knowledgeable decisions based on what we know to be right or wrong or good or bad in any situation we may face. These decisions may be viewed as being based on former experience or simply on innate ideas and common knowledge of life. We know it to be true that the causation of these ideas are only possible due to the electricity and energy that our brains harness and isolate to certain areas to create the formation and understanding of certain concepts. The primary scientific knowledge that this occurs has given rise to a theory that we, ourselves, are not responsible for any thinking or decision making at all but are the result of our unconscious mind transmitting the messages of firing neurons to either support or negate actions to be taken in any given instance. In other words, we are hardwired to be exactly whom and what we are. In this view, the only thing that has constructed our lives is the experience we have attained and learned from since childbirth. There exist an opposite view to the former, which has been around much longer. We may explore the concept of a soul <https://assignbuster.com/neuroscience-and-dualism/>

and what exactly constitutes such a thing that creates a massively dividing opinion of the nature of the mind. Many qualities have been presented throughout thousands of years and millions of human minds and opinions. Some see ethics as the separating factor. They may say that our desire and willingness to do what is morally right over an action that might possibly be beneficial for one's self is a primary demonstration of a soul at work. For most, as with the first view, it is seen as simply our ability to rationalize and reason and to make intelligent decisions. Many may argue that it might be constituted in our ability to transcend sensual desire, eliminating the animal within. The nature or essence of the human soul has been in question since the very earliest periods of foundational philosophical thought. This is the reason that questions of this category, pondering the very basic principle of our reality, have been given the title of first philosophy. In choosing a structured philosophical work to display a most urgent but seemingly rational and well-organized idea of mind/body dualism, there was no question, for me, as to which philosopher's concepts I would focus my attention. Rene Descartes is viewed by many to be the father of modern philosophy because of the radical skepticism that encompassed his ideals. Though the dialogues of his doubt can seem to travel close to the borders of insanity, it is certainly clear that Descartes knew exactly where his ideas on perception in reality would eventually lead him. Although these are challenges that will never likely exist in the minds of most all people, anyone may be susceptible to skepticism while reading this man's work. No matter how much one may agree or disagree with his principles, there is no doubt that Meditations on First Philosophy was a revolutionary set of ideas that established a modern school of rationalist thought and a modern school of empirical thought to

<https://assignbuster.com/neuroscience-and-dualism/>

oppose it. While most everyone around Descartes was choosing to take refuge in the newly formed sciences, he saw this as opening up large questions of why we should trust our senses in order to understand the truth of reality. Descartes finds it important that, in order to truly grasp this work, we must set aside all of our sensual prejudices and beliefs of how we previously viewed reality, assuming that one was not already a rationalist. Being concerned with only the presence and separation of soul and body, I will focus solely on certain Meditations, namely Meditations One and Two, with a conclusion in Meditation Six. The First Meditation is entitled, "Concerning Those Things That Can be called into Doubt", so we may clearly see that this is a display of all things that may be falsely viewed as the foundations of reality. He claimed that he had reached a point in his life in which he was able to truly analyze the nature of things and challenge the beliefs that he once lived in accordance with. He starts by explaining how his senses have, at one point, deceived him, and states that, "It is a mark of prudence to never to place our complete trust in those who have deceived us even once". He goes further to show how insane people may view themselves in illusory fashion. Descartes saw himself as not much different due to the existence of the dream state. We could merely be asleep, just dreaming of an imaginary life around us, for reality may seem dreamlike in many occasions. He challenged his own thought by saying that these ideas of dreams, if we are dreaming, must be conceived somehow. To clarify, things in our dreams are not completely imaginary but are representations of objects in a wakened life. Descartes continues to talk of the existence of an all-powerful God, through which any and all things are ultimately possible. He is a good philosopher in noticing this belief in himself

<https://assignbuster.com/neuroscience-and-dualism/>

and how it might serve as an obstacle for the concepts he is trying to reveal in his work. Since we have the ability to be misled in the first place, there is definitely the possibility that we are always in a state of some sort of perpetual deception. Descartes says that it is possible that God may not be the deceptive one. Maybe it is some demonic force that acts in this way, showing his possible belief in such things. Either way we cannot ignore this possibility. From this idea we may conclude the First Meditation by knowing that nothing is to be taken for granted as actual reality. Meditation Two is entitled, " Concerning the Nature of the Human Mind: That It is Better Known than the Body". Once again, the title infers absolutely the truth that Descartes sought in his next passage. He begins by telling what trouble that doubts of the previous day had caused in his life. He gives the analogy of being tossed around like he was stuck in a whirlpool, but then tightens back to his disciplinary study. In the beginning he assumes total falsity in all sensual perception, deeming this a necessary state of existence to move forward in his ideals. We are to dispose of all beliefs held firm through the senses. Descartes, in doing this, challenges his own beliefs, for if nothing really exists, do I, myself exist? Do I exist independent of my body? He talks about all the things, which he has used to attribute to his soul, such as walking, eating, sensing, and dreaming. At this point in the Meditation an astounding idea is formed when Descartes states, " What about thinking? Here I make my discovery: thought exists; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am; I exist — this is certain". So it is clear for Descartes, the only quality that can be truly associated with the soul is that of thinking. He is in great praise of his doubt, for without doubting he would not have come to the conclusion of what really constitutes the soul and his own existence.

Therefore, he gives himself the title of a thinking thing by saying that he is, "a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and perceives". He explains our bodies to be mere shape, or like a hull, if they exist at all. Descartes gives the analogy of a piece of wax being melted by the heat of a fire. Even though the physical structure of the wax has changed, he knows that it is wax because of his intellect, not his senses. He disclaims the importance of sensual perception and gives dominance to the structure of the mind. In Meditation Six, Descartes concludes his argument with the final division of the body from the soul. He comes to realize that this aptitude to think is what greatly defines his essence. He demonstrates this by saying, "I have a clear and distinct idea of myself as a thinking, non-extended thing, and a clear and distinct idea of a body as an extended, non-thinking thing. Whatever I can conceive clearly and distinctly, God can also create". This idea seems to be totally acceptable until the time comes to show how these two distinct entities interact with one another. The central claim, of what would come to be known as the Cartesian Dualism, took the stance that both entities, being clearly distinct from each other causally interacted on a regular basis. Descartes would never be able to fully show the validity of this stance. This confliction, which is considered by most to be the major issue of debate in this work, has come to be known as the Problem of Interactionism. Its basis is the question, how can a nonmaterial, independent mind actually cause anything in a physical, concrete body, and vice-versa. Descartes explanation of an occasionalist interaction was and is refuted largely by empiricist. In any interaction of the two entities, there is seen to be created a point of unity, and therefore, it conflicts with the overall message of the Meditations. Descartes somewhat contradicts himself by

<https://assignbuster.com/neuroscience-and-dualism/>

saying there is a relationship of reasoning to begin with and then creating a system of total separation. It is very difficult to totally deny the ability of inductive reasoning in our formation of knowledge. I noticed a few problems in the readings myself. For me, it seems radical to discredit the probability for change. Descartes makes it a clear point that we must never trust something that deceives us once, but to me, perception is too complex to allow a person to doubt the total structure of reality. Also, he does not seem to take into account that our bodies may be solely responsible for the deception we experience, it neither has to be the work of God or some demon. He states that thought can never be taken from one's self, but this is not necessarily true. Any major accident may cause enough brain damage to put one into a vegetative, non-responsive state. This problem might open several questions of identity and separation of the mind from the body, if one's thought process is affected in such a way. It is also clear that Descartes is a firm believer in an all-powerful God, and no matter how much he steered away from that, his prejudices can be seen clearly in his work. Now to move on to an extremely contrasting view, much different from that of Cartesian Dualism, I will introduce some of the basic ideas of modern neuroscience. The common goal of all scientists in this field is to explain human behavior by explaining the activities of the natural brain. As stated by leading scientist, Dr. Eric Kandel in his *Principles of Neural Science*, "The task is to show how the brain marshals its individual nerve cells to produce behavior, and how to show how these cells are influenced by the environment". Many consider it to be the last frontier of biological science, which seeks a scientific understanding of human consciousness, how our mental processes are based on what we perceive. One could hardly imagine

<https://assignbuster.com/neuroscience-and-dualism/>

a more distant view from that of Descartes. Neuroscience may be studied on many different levels, namely molecular, cellular, systemic, and cognitive branches. The two most associated with philosophy of the soul and its rejection is systemic and cognitive neuroscience. The systemic study is concerned with how the circuits in our brains affect certain mechanisms, which are believed to create a behavior of the overall brain network.

Fundamentally it is associated with the senses and memory and outcome of those variables acting upon the individual. An example might be studying an infant to understand how the brain structure is created. Cognitive neuroscience, wrapped deeply in the concepts and theories of cognitive psychology, seeks a way to provide a mapping of the brain structure to provide insight of how and why we think the way we do. This may be viewed as the greatest enemy to the school of rationalism. The view is completely deterministic, claiming that all of one's behavioral actions stem from nothing but memory storage and conceptions of things experienced in the physical world. It is strongly based on the belief that all previous experience will provide the outcome of future events in an individual's life. It is easy to see that the unconscious mind plays a large role in the shaping of our everyday reality. There is, not only, no separation of soul from body, but there is no soul whatsoever. To provide an example of how modern neuroscience is challenging the views of dualist, I decided to share one piece of technology that might eventually change the way we perceive the mind. Functional imaging has always been a large part of this young science. However, it is only in very recent years that the development of Brain-Computer Interfaces (BCI) has caused great excitement through scientific breakthroughs.

Originally designed to repair hearing, sight, and movement of damaged

<https://assignbuster.com/neuroscience-and-dualism/>

neurons in the brain, BCIs have caused much inquiry about their possibilities. All that exists at this point are what is called One-Way BCIs. These complex devices link the neuron centers of the brain to computer systems in order to either send or receive messages to and from an individual's neural system. They cannot send and receive simultaneously; nevertheless, the results have been astonishing. In 1999, at the University of California-Berkeley, Dr. Yang Dan was able to record the neural firings of a cat while showing it a movie and then to display these recordings onto a projector screen. He did this by injecting a certain type of electrodes into the Thalamus region of the cat's brain. The reaction to this revolutionary experiment was utter amazement by the scientific community. Although failure has been the popular trend with the development of a Two-Way BCI, which might be able to communicate directly with the human brain by sending and receiving electro neural messages, scientists continue to gain more knowledge of the behavior of the brain structure, and along with modern technology, the possibilities are nearly unlimited. Besides being completely depressing, in my opinion, this view has other problems. The great Immanuel Kant showed this when he introduced, what he called, the Copernican Revolution, saying that there exists certain fundamental judgments or categories that all experience gained in the physical world must be put into. So, there are innate properties within each of us at birth, properties so powerful and with such influence that not one of us would be able to construct an idea of what it means to be human without them. An unwavering empiricist might often argue that this is not a problem but can be explained through the study of genetics, and along with the brain's capacity for memory, is responsible for our conscious minds. Other problems in neuroscience are based only on the fact that scientific

<https://assignbuster.com/neuroscience-and-dualism/>

technology has not advanced to the point to allow their main theory of determinism to be proven. They are not yet able to provide a neural basis for subjective consciousness. Perception and the transfer of sensory information are not yet understood to the fullest extent. There is no scientific tool capable of retrieving memory information, and the process of learning is still fairly misunderstood. The underlying brain mechanism for dreaming is also still largely a mystery. Despite all of these undiscovered theories, it is important to remember that this science is still in its beginning stages. We have explored and contrasted two very opposing sides of what is a most fundamental human question. Is there a soul? As long as we have existed on this earth and as long as we do exist, as a race, these questions raised will be worthy of further idealism, discovery, and improvement. We must remember that we are all guaranteed our own opinions on the structure of what makes all of this up. We must also remember that we are only human beings, susceptible to deceit and full of ignorance about the world and universe around us. Let us seek the Truth in a respectful and tolerant fashion. What I seek to question is, even though neuroscience is a necessary part of the natural, healthy individual's body, why can it not be viewed as just another instrument of a spiritual and transcendental soul? In my opinion, without bodies there would be no material structure in which to harness energy and awake the conscious mind. Without the primary soul, there may not be any cyclical energy existing within us, independent of time, with which we construct and conceive all of the concepts of existence. Why can't the soul and the body be considered two great and necessary components of one magnificent life? When that is extinguished, the soul, or life giving property of energy, in an electric state, escapes from the body to be

<https://assignbuster.com/neuroscience-and-dualism/>

reintroduced to the overall cycle of everything existing, only to become the energy which gives spiritual life, or soul, to some newly formed entity or being. That is what I hope to be Truth. Bibliography Cress, Donald A., Trans. "Meditations on First Philosophy: Third Edition". Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 1993. Damasio, A. R. "Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain". New York, NY: Avon Books, 1994. Kandel, Eric. "Autobiography: The Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine 2000". Available from http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/medicine/laureates/2000/kandel-autobio.html. Internet accessed on 25 September 2008. Lebedev, M. A. "Brain-Machine Interfaces: Past, Present, and Future". Available from <http://www.cs.uu.nl/docs/rakken/mmpi/papers/lebedev%202006.pdf>. Internet accessed 26 September 2008 Schmultz, Tad. "Rene Descartes", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Summer Edition, 2002.