

Descartes notion of the mind body problem in relation to free will

[Psychology](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Descartes notion of the mind/body problem in relation to Free Will Descartes took an extreme skeptical position by asking, "What is impossible to doubt, even when trying to believe that everything is false?" His answer was: "I think, therefore I am"; which is Descartes' most famous one-liner and is the one that explains his understanding of the dualism argument. The term 'dualism' has a variety of uses in the history of thought. In general, the idea is that, for some particular domain, there are two fundamental kinds or categories of things or principles. In the philosophy of mind, dualism is the theory that the mental and the physical or mind and body are, in some sense, radically different kinds of thing. The main discussion about dualism tends to start from the assumption of the reality of a physical world, and then ways of considering arguments for why the mind cannot be treated as simply part of that physical world. According to substance dualism, our minds and our bodies are two distinct substances capable of existing apart. Descartes substance dualism was based in the belief that the universe consisted of two different kinds of substances that he called *res extensa* (physical things) and *res cogitans* (thinking things). In other words, the essence of mind is thought while the essence of body is extension. This belief also leads to his assumption that Free Will is self-evident. In other words, if one is capable of doubting the existence of things learned through experience even when some of these may be true, then it is obvious that we have the freedom to disbelieve, thus free will. The full argument can be broken down into seven steps: (1) if I can clearly and distinctly perceive something, then God makes something that exists that corresponding to my clear and distinct perception, otherwise God would be a deceiver. (2) If I can

clearly and distinctly perceive X and Y as complete things whose principal attributes exclude each other, then God can make X and Y exist apart from each other. (3) If X and Y can exist apart from each other (whether or not they really do) then they are really distinct. (4) I can clearly and distinctly perceive mind as a complete thing to which extension does not pertain. (5) I can clearly and distinctly perceive body as a complete thing to which thought does not pertain. (6) Therefore, God could bring it about that mind and body exist apart from each other. (7) Therefore, mind and body are really distinct (SparkNotes Editors). This argument is clearly understandable when we separate it as is shown at the previous line. In overall, what is most important to remember about the argument is if I am able to perceive is because I exist, if I exist a divine being must have created this thought on my mind, which would imply, that God make me able of perceiving mind and body as two completely separate substances; If God allows me to perceive these two things separate, then it must be true that mind and body exist apart from each other. The problem for Descartes is two-fold. First, if humans are free, then that which is free is not subject to the laws of physics or res-*extensa* like Descartes called the term. By definition all physical things are subject to the laws of physics. When we contrast these conditions of physical laws, and we are talking about the mind, it fails. The mind which is described as the source of will, must be distinct from the body and must not be physical in the natural world. In other words, the presence of a mind allows human beings to transcend their physical bodies and be free. However, we need to be aware that even if Descartes is claimed this separation of substances, he recognizes that the mind is affected by the body in certain

special way. He would argue this by explaining the religious concept of the soul. Descartes complicates the simplistic notion of "mind-body" by introducing "soul" as part of mindful awareness. This whole argument would turn from mind-body problem to Mind, Body and Soul. The problem is that the strong attributes of the mind/body combine tend to determine the attributes of the soul." The soul moves and feels in the body directly. The pineal gland allows the mind and body to interact said Descartes, which was proven wrong lately. Descartes such as many other philosophers was a believer of the soul. Plato for example, argued that, as the body is from the material world, the soul is from the world of ideas and is thus immortal. He believed the soul was temporarily united with the body and would only be separated at death, when it would return to the world of Forms. Since the soul does not exist in time and space, as the body does, it can access universal truths. For Plato, ideas are the true reality, and are experienced by the soul. The body is for Plato empty in that it cannot access the abstract reality of the world; it can only experience shadows. Aristotle, said, "It is not necessary to ask whether soul and body are one, just as it is not necessary to ask whether the wax and its shape are one, nor generally whether the matter of each thing and that of which it is the matter are one. For even if one and being are spoken of in several ways, what is properly so spoken of is the actuality"; in overall, the soul is a property exhibited by the body, one among many. Moreover, Aristotle proposed that when the body perishes, so does the soul, just as the shape of a building block disappears with destruction of the block. On the other hand, Descartes said, "My view is that this gland is the principal seat of the soul, and the place in which all our

thoughts are formed". This previous sentence definitely proves Descartes belief in the human soul and his concern of understanding it and explains it thru his works at the same time. Descartes conclude his argument saying that Since we can clearly and distinctly perceive of mind without body and of body without mind, God can bring it about that mind can exist without body and body without mind. In other words, they are really distinct- Rene Descartes. Now, that we understand the mind-body argument from Descartes perspective, we can explain how he relates these two substances with the ability every human being free will. After the Scholastics, Descartes takes the conception of will and affirmed that the main ability of the mind is the ability of free will. In other words, for Descartes the essence of the mind consists of thought. Now, we found that the main focus of the argument is not the mind body argument, but the significance that Descartes gives to free will in his work. First thing, is to understand the significance and real purpose of the will. The will's practical function consist in fighting the passions; which means that we are literally able to control any action that we do, because we have freedom of choice. The argument here would be that the will is just the mind in its active capacity so the functioning of all mental faculties (intellect, imagination, memory, and sense perception) are dependent on the will (Ferguson). I truly believe that studying and understanding Descartes study of the will would resolve many of the gaps that philosopher had left on the way. Finally, we have got to the major argument of the paper that is explained how Descartes argument of mind-body is strictly relate with humans free will. Everything begins with the claim made by Descartes in his Meditation II, in which he affirms that willing,

affirming, and denying is what gave us absolute freedom. Whenever we are aware of something, we are willing something, simple as that. Descartes concept of will is very cautious and quite interesting if one put himself of herself to understanding it. To explain this, Descartes begin by explain what is the intellect and how it relate and differ from the concept of will. Descartes complex treatment of freedom is due to the complexity of the subject matter, which even with it difficulties it is pretty cogent and interesting. For Descartes, the will (which implies freedom) is dependent on the intellect for its functioning. In other words, without an idea there is nothing in which we can take a stand. Willing is just nothing but a way of thinking; will is infinite, while intellect is finite. The intellect is finite and limited because there are varying degrees at which perceptions and understanding can function. For example, some of us have extremely analysis ability while other can just do simple understanding. The will, on the other hand, is infinite because its efficacy is not a matter of degree. My ability of having free will, make me able to affirm or deny any proposition put to me by my intellect alone. From Descartes perspective, God has given us a will which has no limits and that can be dependent. Believe or not the will and the intellect are interacting most of the time. This is why; Descartes emphasizes the unity of the mind as the faculty of knowledge which he called pure " intellect". However, the main focus is the interaction of the will with the soul on the one hand, and with the body, on the other. In conclusion, Descartes presented us a mind body problem from a Christian perspective, which had a purpose of affirmed the existence of the two substances, res-extensa and res cogitans completely separate from each other. To explain this, He described the mind as the

source of will that must be distinct from the body and the physical world. We cannot will anything without understanding what are we willing and if we get a little deep into this thought is quite easy to make sense to it. We cannot leave behind either that Descartes, showed a strong concern to show his belief in the human soul while he would try to prove the existence of God, and even of himself. This would turn the whole argument to Mind, Body and soul, which is the real Christian perspective. In overall, he claimed that soul cannot exist in time and space; and that the attributes of the mind-body combine are the one that truly determine the attributes of the soul.

Descartes began his explanation of the concept of will by affirming that the main ability of the mind is the ability of free will. Will, in other words, is the whole mind in its active capacity. To support this statement Descartes used many concepts in relation that in his theory, they all work together to make free will happen. By having theoretical functions, practical functions, actions caused by the soul, and a strong direct relation with the mind-body problem, I truly believe that Descartes purpose of explaining his concern of the concept of will was well clearly done. Work Cited Mihali, Andreea. "

Descartes' Concept of Will." Wilfrid Laurier University (Canada), 2007.

Canada: ProQuest. Web. 11 Apr. 2013. Ferguson, Christopher J. " Free Will: An Automatic Response." American Psychologist 55. 7 (2000): 762-763.

PsycARTICLES. Web. 12 Apr. 2013. SparkNotes Editors. " SparkNote on Principles of Philosophy. " SparkNotes. com. SparkNotes LLC. n. d.. Web. 14 Mar. 2013. Marias, Julian. History of Philosophy. New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1967. 210-222. Print. Angeles, Peter. The Harper Collins Dictionary Philosophy. 2nd. United States: Harper Collins Publishers, Print.