

# Descartes views on the mind and body



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In "Meditation VI" (see week 5 reading) Descartes argues that there is a fundamental difference between mind and body. Do you think Descartes is right? If yes, explain why, if not, explain why

The mind body dilemma has been subject of philosophical analysis for decades and has yet to be fully understood. As the principal advocate for dualism, Descartes states that as humans we are composed of two major substances: the mental and the physical which manage to exist side by side. Without a doubt, Cartesian Dualism was one of Descartes major contributions to the study of philosophy; idea with which I agree based on the following analysis.

The fundamental choice between the mind-body problem and its contra argument is the existence of materialism and its denial. Descartes states that the mind is separate from the body based on the reasoning that the mind exists and stands alone as a substance, therefore; they must be separate things. He then proceeds to add that anything that is physical occupies space. Unlike the mind, the body can be altered due to its materialistic nature, and can be changed and divided into smaller components. We find further support in Leibniz' Law, which states that " if a has a property that b lacks, then a is not identical to b" which are applicable to the mind and body, as the mind does not occupy space, it is just housed by the body.

Another argument is the one of introspection, which relays on the rationale that our best evidence for the existence of mental substance is the access to our own minds. Via introspection of the mind, we are capable of accessing

and assessing different features of our own minds such as feelings, sensations, desires, etc. None of them have physical properties. Descartes then elaborates on this principle stating that there are certain things that come naturally to us as humans such as desires, which come instinctively. However, there are others such as thinking, which needs to be based on intentionality. Among these features we also encounter consciousness, which has been defined by Descartes as the epitome of the human nature, although it is not something that can be perceived by the senses, thus, it is not physical. We are capable of imagining the existence of our mind without the body. In the case of any material object, you can describe object "a" as existing or object "a" as not existing; however there cannot be a blending of both premises. Contrary to this, we have consciously just pictured the mind existing without the body, therefore it must follow that the mind and the body are separate things. As written in Descartes Meditation VI : *"And although I may, or rather, as I will shortly say, although I certainly do possess a body with which I am very closely conjoined; nevertheless, because, on the one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in as far as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and as, on the other hand, I possess a distinct idea of body, in as far as it is only an extended and unthinking thing, it is certain that I, that is, my mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it."* [i] (Descartes, Meditation VI)

An example would be a paralyzed patient, where he is totally aware of his environment, and is conscious about his desire to perform an action, yet he

cannot do so. He lacks the capability to acquire sensations physically, although he can still imagine what it would feel like to perform such task.

As with any major idea, we find opposition, in this case, on the hands of the scientific community. The notion that Descartes work fails to completely explain how the connection between mind and body works is enough to trigger a response. As explained in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: *“ Willis wrote about the pineal gland that we can scarcely believe this to be the seat of the soul, or its chief faculties to arise from it because animals which imagination, memory and other superior powers of the soul have this glandula or kernel large and fair enough”.* (Lockhorst, 2013) [ii]

Furthermore, Descartes idea has been rejected based on the fact that the attributes linked to the mind are simple responses to neurological and chemical stimulus in the brain. An example can be the use of any drug. Although the mind is supposed to be an independent entity from the body, when any sort of chemical/drug is ingested it can alter the mental state, though most of the time, it also alters your body as well. Same analogy applies if the patient suffers some physiological damage to the brain; it will yield physical consequences and changes in motor coordination. Although the bridge between the mind and the body may not lay at the pineal gland, a clear distinction between these two properties has been done in the past and it should not be neglected the fact that according to Descartes the single most important characteristic of the human nature is consciousness and not the soul as the human essence, our ability to think and rationalize our thoughts.

As in all, although Descartes dualism theory is not infallible and it fails to thoroughly explain how exactly the connection between body and mind works, it does satisfy the purposes of explaining why would the mind be something different from the body via means of his very simple, yet logical arguments. Descartes went as far as creating what it is called a “trialistic distinction” where he unites and acknowledges the possibilities of the existence of the mind, the body and the union of the latter as a third state.

---

### References

[i]Descartes, Meditation VI Canvas excerpt.

[ii]Lokhorst, G.-J. (2013, September 18). Descartes and the Pineal gland. Retrieved March 5, 2017, from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pineal-gland/>