

Class #18 - Cartesian Dualism  
Descartes, "On the Nature of Mind"  
Arnauld and Descartes on the Mind

## I. Dualism

We have already seen our first theory of mind in another guise, as a theory of personhood. When we talked about the soul theory of personhood, we read Plato's *Phaedo*. I also mentioned Descartes's view. For Descartes, the self is the soul and the soul is the mind.

Descartes's view is called dualism because of his belief in two distinct kinds of substances: minds and bodies.

Minds are different kinds of things from bodies.

Bodies are mechanical, extended, physical things.

Minds, or souls, are essentially thinking and non-physical.

Dualism is contrasted with two kinds of monism.

The materialist monist believes that there are no immaterial minds.

Thomas Hobbes and Pierre Gassendi, contemporaries of Descartes, were materialist monists.

Many, if not most, contemporary philosophers and scientists are materialist monists.

Idealist monists, in contrast, believe that there is no material world, no bodies at all.

Berkeley, as we saw, is an idealist monist.

Descartes's two related arguments for the differences between minds and bodies are found in the final, Sixth Meditation.

Let's start with an overview of the narrative of the whole work.

## II. Descartes's *Meditations*: An Overview

At the beginning of the *Meditations*, Descartes presents three destructive arguments for doubt.

These arguments are intended only as a prelude to the larger, constructive work.

Descartes's goal is to establish certainty about the nature of the external world, God, and our minds.

The doubts are mainly intended to denigrate the role of our senses in justifying our beliefs and to focus on what we know by reasoning.

In the Second Meditation, Descartes starts to rebuild his set of beliefs by noticing that we can not doubt our own existence.

That observation, which we called the cogito, leads to Descartes's claim that we are essentially thinking things.

We can doubt the existence of our bodies, but we can not doubt the existence of our minds.

Descartes believes that this difference indicates something important about our nature.

Consciousness, according to Descartes, is the mark of the mental, is what makes a mind.

By the term 'thought', I understand everything which we are aware of as happening within us, in so far as we have awareness of it.... (*Principles* I.9)

Thinking can be further characterized.

But what then am I? A think that thinks. what is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions (MII, AT 28)

Descartes observes that none of these conscious, thinking processes seem to be physical. That observation does not settle the question, though, since we might just be unaware of our true nature.

After the cogito, Descartes struggles to find another belief that is, like the cogito, resilient to doubt. All of his initial attempts are unsuccessful.

Any time he thinks he has a robust belief, like those of simple arithmetic, he finds that the deceiver argument gives him good reason to doubt its truth.

Descartes decides that he must eradicate his belief in the possibility of a deceiver.

To do so, he presents two arguments for the existence of a benevolent God.

Since, he argues, there is a benevolent God, we need not worry about systematic deception as long as we pay attention to the proper way to acquire beliefs.

We will not discuss Descartes's arguments for the existence of God, but I'll give you a very brief description of them here.

One is a variation of the argument from first cause: every effect requires a cause.

As we trace causes backwards, we need a first cause, which we can call God.

The second argument is called the ontological argument for God's existence, and traces to St. Anselm.

In Descartes's version of the argument, we notice that the concept of God is that of a thing with all perfections.

It is more perfect to exist than not to exist, so the concept of God must include the concept of existence.

Thus, the very concept of God is such that it must be of an existing God.

Further, the concept of God is such that God must be all good.

Once Descartes has argued for the existence of a benevolent God, he returns to his project of examining beliefs and reclaiming the acceptable ones.

The proper way to acquire beliefs, Descartes notices, is not through sense perception.

Aside from the illusion and dream arguments, Descartes provides two less fanciful, and therefore more forceful, arguments for the misleading nature of sense experience.

We discussed both the wax argument and the sun argument earlier in the term.

The wax argument is just like Locke's arguments against the reality of the secondary qualities.

Our senses give us misleading information.

From the sun argument, Descartes concludes that when sensation and thought conflict, sensation is less reliable.

The senses tell us that the sun is very small.

We reason, using mathematics and abstract, general physical principles, that the sun is very large.

Both ideas surely cannot resemble the same sun existing outside me; and reason convinces me that the idea that seems to have emanated from the sun itself from so close is the very one that least resembles the sun (Meditation Three).

We decide in favor of reasoning, and against sensation.

Still, given the destructive power of the three doubts, we need some kind of mark, or rule, which enables us to separate knowledge from mere belief.

In Meditation Two, we only know one thing: the cogito.  
Descartes examines it, to see what quality the cogito has that makes it immune to doubt.  
Then, he applies these properties to other beliefs as criteria for knowledge.  
Descartes calls his criteria for knowledge clarity and distinctness.

Something is clear when it is present and apparent to an attentive mind, in the same way as we assert that we see objects clearly when, being present to the regarding eye, they operate upon it with sufficient strength (Descartes, *Principles* I.45).

Note that Descartes's use of 'perception' is metaphoric.  
We can not see with our senses clearly and distinctly.  
Only the mind, as the seat of pure thought, sees clearly and distinctly.  
So Descartes has a starting point, the cogito.  
And now he has a rule for generating more truths: whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true.  
I can be sure of the truth of clear and distinct perceptions because of the goodness of God which ensures that the deceiver is not fooling us in cases where we are most certain.

### III. Descartes's Arguments for Dualism

In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes provides two arguments that the mind is distinct from the body, though most attention gets paid to the first.

Simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing (AT 78).

Here is a regimented version of the argument.

MB MB1. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my mind, independent of my body.  
MB2. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my body, independent of my mind.  
MB3. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive of as separate, can be separated by God, and so are really distinct.  
MBC. So, my mind is distinct from my body

MB1 and MB2 rely on Descartes's characterizations of the mind and body, as well as his use of clear and distinct perception.

In the *Principles*, he says that every substance has one essential characteristic.

The mind is that which thinks.

The body is essentially extended.

To each substance there belongs one principal attribute; in the case of mind, this is thought, and in the case of body it is extension. A substance may indeed be known through any attribute at all; but each substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred. Thus extension in length, breadth and depth constitutes the nature of corporeal substance; and thought constitutes the nature of thinking substance. Everything else which can be attributed to body presupposes extension, and is merely a mode of an extended thing; and similarly, whatever we find in the mind is simply one of the various modes of thinking (*Principles of Philosophy* §I.53).

While minds are essentially conscious, bodies are mere machines.  
In fact, our bodies are no different in kind from those of other complex animals.  
We have similar sense organs, and brain structures.

[Cartesians were convinced of the absence of animal souls, and some were notorious vivisectionists.  
Descartes's writings on animal souls are in themselves ambiguous.]

If the mind is essentially thinking and the body is essentially extended, the mind and the body are clearly distinct things.

Descartes claims that we may confuse the nature of mind and body because of the union of our minds with our bodies.

For example, consider our faculty of imagination, the mind's ability to receive images from the senses. It seems that we first receive images, and then reason about them.

Descartes argues that this picture is misleading.

In theory, we can think, and even exist, without imagination, without any sensory input.

But because our bodies and minds happen to be united, we are distracted, like Plato's cave-dwelling prisoners, by our sensory experience.

MB3 is especially controversial.

The ability of an omnipotent God to separate two objects may not be relevant to the nature and relations of those objects.

Even if there were a God who could separate my mind from my body, perhaps my mind is, in fact, just a part of, or an aspect of, my body.

MB3 is what generates substance dualism, the claim that minds are non-physical, instead of a weaker conceptual dualism, from which no substantial distinction follows.

Conceptual dualism is just the observation that we have different concepts and different language for bodily states and for mental states.

But, the conceptual dualist need make no claims about the ultimate natures of bodies and minds, about whether minds are reducible to bodies or not, about whether minds are immaterial souls.

Descartes's second, related argument for the mind/body distinction is based on the divisibility of bodies.

- DB DB1. Whatever two things have different properties are different objects.
- DB2. The mind is indivisible.
- DB3. The body is divisible.
- DBC. So, the mind is not the body.

While our minds have various functions, it seems that they have no parts.

Our bodies have parts.

Our visual fields have parts.

We even have lots of different memories and beliefs.

But, the conscious mind is singular.

We can think about propositions composed of subjects and predicates.

Our visual field has regions.

But these are objects of our thought.

The thinking self, that which perceives the stream of consciousness, is unary.

Later, Kant calls the object of Descartes's claim at DB2 the [unity of apperception](#).

In response to DB, a materialist may allege that we just have not noticed that the mind is in fact divisible. If the mind is the brain, then it has parts that we do not perceive from the inside.

There are other attributes of the mind and soul, which Descartes discusses elsewhere.

Descartes mentions that these other attributes contribute to the argument for the distinction between the mind and the body.

The most important attribute is Descartes's argument that knowledge of God is innate, impressed on the soul of human beings like the mark of a painter on his work.

Also, Descartes discusses the distinction between willing and understanding, which helps account for the problem of error.

The way in which discussions of these attributes contributes to the main argument is that they serve as support for the claim that we have a complete understanding of the mind, without any material attributes.

#### IV. Arnauld's Objection

Descartes argues that our knowledge of the mind is complete and yet includes no bodily elements.

Similarly, he argues that our knowledge of bodies is complete without including any mental properties.

Arnauld believes that Descartes's argument for the completeness of his knowledge of the mind comes from the Second Meditation, where Descartes argues that he knows he exists, and knows about himself, without knowing that bodies exist.

Indeed, Descartes's argument about the wax concludes with an observation that even incomplete and dubitable beliefs about the body lead to knowledge of the mind.

As Arnauld interprets it, Descartes's argument thus rests on the fact that I can doubt that my body exists, but I can not doubt that I exist.

Descartes argues that we can be certain, not only of the existence of our minds, but also of many of its properties.

The certainty of our knowledge of our minds persists, even if we doubt the existence of our bodies.

Further, we know so much of our minds, even without any knowledge of bodies, that our knowledge of minds must be taken to be complete.

Thus, the body must not be essential for our minds.

Arnauld counters Descartes's argument with an example from mathematics.

Consider a triangle inscribed in a semi-circle.

We can be certain that it is right-angled, that it is a right triangle.

The certainty of our knowledge of our right triangle persists, even if we doubt, or fail to recognize, that the sum of the squares of the legs is equal to the square of the hypotenuse.

Thus, if Descartes's reasoning about the mind and body is sound, it follows that the Pythagorean theorem must not be essential to the triangle.

But, we can prove that the Pythagorean theorem holds necessarily of the triangle.

Descartes's reasoning is shown to be unsound because the same form of argument, with different content, is invalid.

Thus, he has not established that the body is not essential to the self.

If Descartes's argument is valid, then AO, in the spirit of Arnauld's worries, is also valid.

- AO     AO1. I have a clear and distinct understanding of Clark Kent, as someone who can not fly.  
          AO2. I have a clear and distinct understanding of Superman, as someone who can fly.  
          AO3. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive of as separate, can be separated by God, and so are really distinct.  
          AOC. So, Clark Kent is not Superman.

AOC is clearly false.

But, the form of AO is the same as the form of MB.

To defend his argument, Descartes must respond by finding a difference between the two arguments such that AO is unsound while MB remains sound.

Descartes could insist that we do not have a clear and distinct understanding of Clark Kent.

Perhaps our knowledge of him is inadequate.

Denigrating our knowledge of Clark Kent solves the problem with the Superman argument.

But, that solution might rebound on the first premise of Descartes's original argument.

We have to wonder whether our knowledge of the mind or body is also inadequate.

If our knowledge of the mind were adequate, then, perhaps, we would understand that the mind is the body, and not distinct from it.

## V. Descartes's Responses to Arnauld

In response to Arnauld, Descartes first distinguishes between substances and attributes.

He claims to have understanding of two complete substances.

Arnauld presents one substance (a triangle) and one property (that the Pythagorean theorem holds of it).

Still, Arnauld can hold that Descartes is claiming that the mind, a substance, lacks any bodily properties.

So, this distinction will not help Descartes.

Second, Descartes concedes that we can understand that a triangle is right-angled without understanding that the Pythagorean theorem holds, but claims that we can not understand that the Pythagorean theorem holds without understanding that the triangle is right-angled.

This claim appears false.

The Pythagorean theorem is just a general case of a more general theorem, the Law of Cosines.

In any triangle ABC,  $c^2 = a^2 + b^2 - 2ab \cos C$ .

Let us say that we are given the measurements of three sides of a right triangle (e.g. 5, 12, and 13) and told to solve for the measure of angle C.

We could notice that the three terms other terms drop out, that  $c^2 = a^2 + b^2$ , leaving  $\cos C = 0$ .

From this, we derive that C is a right angle.

But, before we do so, we need not recognize that fact.

In his third response, Descartes argues that there must be some relation holding among the sides.

Since we do not know what that relationship is, in the situation we are considering, we can not be said to have a clear and distinct understanding of the triangle.

But, what evidence could justify his claim that we have complete knowledge of the mind?

Descartes says that we can know, just by introspection, that the body is inessential to the mind, since I can understand, in some special way, the mind, without the body.

Arnauld's point is that we must wonder if the way that we know the mind is insufficient to rule out an essential link to the body.

Descartes believes that our knowledge of the mind is complete, so that his argument for the mind/body distinction succeeds.

Arnauld wonders if our knowledge of the mind is actually incomplete.

## VI. The Problem of Interaction

The main problem with the Cartesian theory of mind is called the problem of interaction.

The problem of interaction is to describe how our bodies and minds could interact, if they are independent substances.

Our bodies affect our minds; our minds affect our bodies.

If they are independent substances, it is hard to see how they could do so.

Gilbert Ryle, defending behaviorism about the mind in the twentieth century, accused Descartes of having to rely on "theoretical shuttlecocks" to transfer information from one domain to the other.

Or, to put the problem in a Hamilton-appropriate way: Why does the mind get drunk when the body does the drinking?

To some people, the problem of interaction for a substance dualist like Descartes appears intractable.

Indeed, monism is motivated mainly by the problem of interaction.

In order to focus the question, Descartes posited that interactions between the mind and body take place in one particular place in the human body, the seat of the soul.

Descartes located the seat of the soul in the [pineal gland](#).

Descartes's view that the pineal gland is the location where the soul interacts with the body does not solve the problem of interaction.

It merely locates the problem.

We could understand, for example, how a computer chip placed in or near our brain might control us, if, say, we were being externally directed by our alien masters.

In such a case, the interaction between the controlling chip and our bodies would be purely physical.

If the controller were not any kind of physical object, it is difficult to see how it could have any effects on physical objects.

During Descartes's time, materialists like Hobbes and Gassendi denied the existence of a non-physical mind.

But their accounts of thought were far too thin to be plausible.

For example, Hobbes thought that memory was explained in terms of inert particles stimulated by experience and continuing to move in the brain.

It is natural to think that motions in the brain (neural firings, say) cause our conscious experience.

It is a different and far less-plausible claim to assert that conscious states are just motions of particles.

That claim seems nearly incomprehensible.

Motion is not color.

Sound is not the motion of air.

The first significant contemporary anti-dualist project was behaviorism, in the early twentieth century. Behaviorism came in several varieties.

We will look at the psychological behaviorists (Skinner) and the positivists (Hempel).