

The Real Distinction between Mind and Body (Meditation VI)

1. Key results from Meditations 3–5

- The criterion of clarity and distinctness [provisionally accepted?]: everything that I clearly and distinctly perceive is true.
- God: two proofs that God exists—the “trademark argument” (Med 3) and the ontological argument (Med 5); crucial to these proofs is the meditator’s (purported) discovery that she has an innate idea of a God (of a particular nature).
- The problem of error (and a solution): if I stick to clear and distinct perceptions, I won’t err, but sometimes (through an act of will) my judgments outstrip my intellect.
- Further insight into the nature of material things: their essence is extension, which can be characterized geometrically.
- What key claims does Descartes establish in Meditation VI?
 - The mind and body are distinct things, i.e., distinct substances.
 - We know that matter exists.
 - Our knowledge of matter, however, is not what we expected when we began.

2. A bad argument for mind-body distinctness

Here’s a bad argument for the distinctness of mind and body (found in Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* (19)):

- i. I can doubt that I have a body. (Premise)
- ii. I can’t doubt that I have a mind. (Premise)
- iii. So the mind and the body differ with respect to dubitability. (From i and ii)
- iv. If two things differ with respect to their properties, then they are distinct, i.e., “Leibniz’s Law” (LL): if $a = b$ then for any property P , a has the property P if and only if b has the property P .
- v. Therefore, bodies and minds are distinct. (From iii and iv)

We can show this argument to be problematic by constructing an analogous argument that is obviously bad. For example:

- i. I can’t doubt that Batman is a superhero.
- ii. I can doubt that Bruce Wayne is a superhero.
- iii. Therefore, Bruce Wayne is distinct from Batman.

Suggestion: the problem isn’t with LL, but with doubt (and other propositional attitudes).

3. A better argument for mind-body distinctness

A reconstruction of the argument (the key passage is p. 97):

- i. If I clearly and distinctly understand that P , God can make it the case that P . (Premise)
- ii. So if I am able to clearly and distinctly understand two things separately, then God can make those things to be separate [i.e., they can exist separately] (From i)
- iii. I c&dly understand myself [a mind] to be essentially thinking and non-extended. (Premise)
- iv. I c&dly understand bodies to be [essentially] extended and non-thinking. (Premise)
- v. So I c&dly understand minds and bodies separately. (From iii and iv)
- vi. Therefore, “it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.” (From ii, v)

Questions:

(a) How essential is God? Even if we can dispense with God, how satisfying is this argument? Has the meditator adequately established (iii) and (iv)?

(b) Consider the Aristotelian idea that the mind/soul is a set of capacities, something like the capacity for the lyre to produce a melody mentioned in Plato’s *Phaedo*. The lyre is made of wood. Let’s contemplate the lyre and the wood. The lyre is essentially an instrument for making music. The wood is essentially material originating from a tree. It would seem that I can clearly and distinctly understand the (essence of) wood without the lyre and the (essence of) lyre without the wood. Does this show that the lyre and the wood are distinct substances, in Descartes’ sense?

4. Mind-body union

A standard characterization of Descartes' view is that he holds that minds and bodies are fundamentally different kinds of substances that exist independently (at least in principle) from each other. This is called substance dualism. However, his view contains a wrinkle, because he also thinks that the mind and body form a tight unit:

Nature also teaches that I am present not merely to my body in the way a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am most tightly joined and, so to speak, commingled with it, so much so that I and the body constitute one single thing. (99)

In 1643, Elisabeth of Bohemia (at age 24) initiated a correspondence with Descartes that lasted until his death (in 1650). (See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/elisabeth-bohemia/>) Her first letter is a locus classicus for an important objection to substance dualism. The problem raised by the objection has come to be known as the "interaction problem."

*Letter #1 (Elisabeth to Descartes)*¹

- (a) "I beseech you tell me how the soul of man (since it is but a thinking substance) can determine the spirits of the body to produce voluntary actions" (11).
- (b) The problem is pressing given how Descartes has defined minds (souls) and bodies, and given a certain conception of causation (the "impulsion" model).

Letter #2 (Descartes to Elisabeth)

- (a) Within ourselves there are certain "primitive notions" of bodies, minds, and the mind-body union.
- (b) We make mistakes when we apply standards proper to one notion to another. "Thus I believe that we hitherto confused the notion of the force by which the soul acts on the body with that by which one body acts upon another" (14).

Letter #3 (Elisabeth to Descartes)

- (a) "[I am] unable to comprehend, from what you had previously said concerning weight, the idea by which we should judge how the soul (nonextended and immaterial) can move the body" (16).
- (b) Gloss: you didn't really answer my question.

Letter #4 (Descartes to Elisabeth)

- (a) We understand each of the mind, body, and the mind-body union through a particular faculty: intellect, intellect + imagination, and sense perception, respectively.
- (b) Through the senses, we "understand" that the mind and body form a union.
- (c) "It does not seem to me that the human mind is capable of conceiving very distinctly, and at the same time, but the distinction between the soul and the body, and also their union; because to do so it is necessary to conceive them as one thing alone, and at the same time to conceive them as two, which is the contrary" (19).
- (d) Gloss: it's hard to understand the mind-body union, but we feel it.

Letter #5 (Elisabeth to Descartes)

- (a) "I too find that the senses show me that the soul moves the body; but they fail to teach me (any more than the understanding and the imagination) the manner in which she does it" (21)
- (b) Gloss: um, obviously the soul and the body interact, the problem is how – especially given their respective natures.

5. The existence of material things

Early in Meditation 6, the meditator offers an argument for the existence of material things motivated by considerations concerning the faculty of imagination (94). (In brief: the differences between imagination and pure intellection suggest that the former depends on material things.) This argument is flagged as offering "only a probability." This surely does not rise to the level of certainty the meditator seeks.

After having established the real distinction between mind and body, the meditator returns to the question of the existence of material things and offers a new argument (98):

- i. I have within myself a passive faculty of sensing.
- ii. I couldn't have this unless there were a corresponding active "faculty," (source of the ideas?)

Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. 4th Edition. Translated by Donald A. Cress. Hackett Publishing, 1998. © Hackett Publishing. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Atherton, Margaret. *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*. Hackett Publishing, 1994. © Hackett Publishing. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

¹ References on this page are to Atherton, ed. *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*, Hackett: 1994.

- iii. This active faculty cannot be in me. [I don't sense at will.]
- iv. So it must be in something other than me.
- v. This other thing must either be a body, God, or "some other creature more noble than a body" (98)
- vi. It can't be God. [God is not a deceiver.]
- vii. (It can't be the third option...because God is not a deceiver??)
- viii. Thus, the active faculty—the source of my sensations—must be some body. "And consequently corporeal things exist" (98).

Questions: How satisfying do you find this argument? Is there an option the meditator fails to consider in trying to locate the active faculty?

6. Descartes' rationalism

Note that although Descartes has established that there are bodies, that things exist, he immediately qualifies his conclusion:

Nevertheless, perhaps not all bodies exist exactly as I grasp them by sense, since this sensory grasp is in many cases very obscure and confused. But at least they do contain everything I clearly and distinctly understand—that is everything, considered in a gender sense, that is encompassed in the object of pure mathematics. (98)

Really? What does he mean? Recall that in the wax argument and then again later in considering the nature of matter, Descartes argued that not only is *extension* the essence of matter, but that the properties we can know about material things are mathematical or geometrical: extension, shape, size, motion. Color, taste, heat, are not properties of material things, but are the effects of material things on us. Just as pain is not in the knife that cuts us, color and scent are not in the flower, but in us. "And although I feel heat as I draw closer to the fire, and I also feel pain upon drawing too close to it, there is not a single argument that persuades me that there is something in the fire similar to that heat, any more than to that pain." (100) So the material world that Descartes has established is devoid of color, taste, smell, sound.

Descartes is motivated in his thinking by a basic rationalist principle: we can know only what we clearly and distinctly conceive. As we turn to the empiricists (Cavendish, Hume) we will find this approach challenged. But note that both Descartes and the empiricists were part of the scientific revolution. No longer can we just take the world at face value. Knowledge of the world is knowledge gained through scientific inquiry. Although physics was far from what we know now, the idea is continuous with our approach: so much more can be explained if we focus on the material world as extended stuff in motion, leaving aside the idiosyncratic properties we notice through sensation. We may feel motion as heat, but the heat is in us, and a proper inquiry into the world considers not the heat, but the motion.

What have we learned through these *Meditations*? In what ways does the world look different now? Although the evil demon has not been successful in eliminating all knowledge, we do not regain the world we lost when we began to doubt.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu>

24.01 Classics of Western Philosophy
Spring 2016

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.