

## The Mind-Body Problem

**1. The Mind-Body Problem:** Descartes held two views that, together, posed a problem for future philosophers. These views were:

- Dualism: The view that there are two distinct sorts of substances in the world; namely, body (i.e., matter) and mind (i.e., souls).
- Interactionism: The view that the mind is capable of affecting the body, and vice versa.

The problem arises: How do these two very different sorts of things interact? How does the soul—an immaterial, non-spatial, unobservable thing—affect the body—a material, spatial, observable thing (and vice versa)?

This question is so difficult to answer that the philosophers following Descartes proposed some of the most bizarre theories in all of philosophy. For instance,

- Monism: This is a rejection of Cartesian Dualism. It is the view that there is only one sort of substance. This might mean that there is ONLY matter, but no minds (e.g., Hobbes), or there are ONLY minds, but no matter (e.g., Berkeley). (Or, that third view of Spinoza's called Dual-Aspectism, which states that there is only one infinite substance with two aspects: physical and mental)
- Parallelism/Occasionalism: These reject Cartesian Interactionism. They propose that mind and body do NOT actually interact. For instance, Parallelism says that God just “wound up” the material world to be synchronized with the mental world. Strictly speaking, your mind does not CAUSE matter to move, nor vice versa. They only SEEM to be causally connected because God set things up so that all mental and the material events occur in unison. Similarly, Occasionalism proposes that, each and every time your mind forms an act of the will—e.g., your mind decides to move your arm—God uses His power to make sure that your body obeys (i.e., God moves your arm—not you).

Nevertheless, Descartes did not consider answering the question a difficult task. Let's take a brief look at what he has to say on the subject.

**2. Descartes' view:** In *Meditation Two*, Descartes offered an argument for the view known as Substance Dualism. This is the view that, in the world, there are two distinct sorts of substances; namely, matter and minds, or bodies and souls.

(a) Substance: "Substance" is what Descartes calls something that can exist on its own; i.e., something that does not require anything else in order to exist. He writes, "By substance, we can understand nothing else that a thing which so exists that it needs no other thing in order to exist." (Principles, 1.51)

Contrast this with properties like red, heavy, fast, etc. These things cannot exist on their own. They require some substance in order to exist. For instance, we might have a red ball, a heavy rock, a fast horse, etc.

(b) The argument for Dualism: Recall the argument from *Meditation Two*, reiterated in his *Principles*, 1.7-8. The argument seems to be something like the following:

1. I can coherently doubt the existence of body.
2. I cannot coherently doubt the existence of mind.
3. If two things are identical, they must share all of the same properties.
4. Therefore, body is not identical to mind (because one can be doubted, while the other cannot).

So, contrary to those Substance Monists who would claim that there are no minds (or, souls), but only matter—or those who would claim that there are no material bodies, but only minds—Descartes thinks it is quite clear that there are TWO distinct substances:

- Bodies: This is the material substance; i.e., matter. Its principal attribute is "extension." By this, Descartes just means that bodies have length, width, and height. Matter also has size, shape, and motion (or rest).
- Minds: This is the immaterial substance; i.e., souls. The principal attribute of souls is thought. By this, Descartes means ALL mental actions; i.e., thought, imagination, emotion, sensation, etc. (Note: Only human beings have souls. This means that animals are PURELY material for Descartes. The implication is that animals do not have thoughts, or feelings, or sensations, etc. They are merely little material machines.)

[Question: But, is premise 3 true? Consider someone who knows what water is, but has never heard of H<sub>2</sub>O. Though it is true that Water= H<sub>2</sub>O, can't this person still know, or believe, or think that water will quench her thirst, but nevertheless NOT know, or believe, or think that H<sub>2</sub>O will quench her thirst?

If premise 3 is true, then it is either the case that this difference in thought is impossible, or else  $\text{water} \neq \text{H}_2\text{O}$ . But, both of those options are absurd.]

(c) Interaction: Descartes did not recognize the problem of explaining HOW an immaterial thing was supposed to communicate with the material body, and vice versa. Clearly, when the body is pricked with a pin, it causes the sensation of pain in the soul. Likewise, when the soul wills to move the body, the body moves. So, body affects mind, and vice versa. But, how?

In his *Passions of the Soul*, he states that the soul communicates to the body via a tiny “kernel” in the brain, which he calls “the pineal gland.” This gland is the “principal seat” of the soul, which is capable of stimulating the nerves that lead from there via fluids Descartes calls “animal spirits,” which then send signals to any part of the body.

Descartes, however, never really explains HOW the soul is capable of producing a PHYSICAL, MATERIAL effect in the nerves, even though it itself is a non-physical and non-material thing. He simply says that the soul “wills it” and it happens. He writes, “all the action of the soul consists in this, that she merely by willing anything can make the little kernel, whereunto she is strictly joined, move in the manner requisite to produce the effect relating to this will.” (article 41)

In short, Descartes believes that there are two distinct substances: a material, extended substance called “body” and an immaterial, thinking substance called “mind”. These are proven to be distinct substances because we can clearly and distinctly conceive of them as being separated, and we can doubt the existence of body, but not thought. These two substances communicate with one another only in one tiny location in the center of the brain, in a gland called the pineal gland.

[Note that Descartes admits that, strictly speaking, God is the only substance (since God alone can exist independently of anything else). Principles, 1.51. Nevertheless, he calls minds and bodies “created substances.” This is something that Spinoza would reject, claiming that “created substance” doesn’t make any sense. This led Spinoza to conclude that the only substance is God.]