

**T**O A LARGE DEGREE, WHAT has come to be known as the “mind-body problem” in philosophy is a product of the philosophy of René Descartes. How can things differing as radically as minds (or souls) and bodies, in Descartes’ conception, be so intimately related, as they clearly are, in every human person? Bodies are solid chunks of material stuff, extended in three-dimensional space, publicly observable and measurable, possessed of a certain mass and velocity, and capable of causing things to happen, in accordance with the invariant laws of mechanics, by transmitting their impact in “collisions” with other material things. A mind, on the other hand, is directly “observable” only by the person who owns it; only he can think his thoughts, feel his emotions, suffer his pains. Although, under certain circumstances, someone else can cut open his skull and see and touch his living *brain*, there is no conceivable way for another to see or touch his mind or its beliefs, sensations, and desires. Minds, moreover, have no size or shape or spatial location, no mass or velocity or capacity to make impact.

Nevertheless, to common sense, it seems certain that minds and bodies do causally interact. When I intend or wish or desire (mental events) to raise my arm, up it goes (bodily event); and when a sliver of wood penetrates my flesh (bodily event), I feel pain (mental event). It would surely seem, then, that in normal cases of action, mental events *cause* physical ones and that, in sensation and perception, physical events *cause* mental ones. Yet how can this be? How can the mind—a massless, weightless, unextended thing—push up against a nerve cell and cause an impulse to be transmitted along a nerve to a muscle? And how can physical stimuli such as wood slivers or even light rays penetrate a thing that has no size or location and cause it to have an experience? Isn’t this as inconceivable as a collision between a physical object and a ghost? This is the kind of difficulty cited by many of Descartes’ own contemporaries in criticism of his philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

Many important seventeenth-century philosophers, no matter how impressed in other ways by the “Cartesian philosophy” (as the philosophy of Descartes came to be called), found Descartes’ theory of interaction between mind and body unacceptable. Some, therefore, came to abandon the part of the Descartes’ philosophy that generated the difficulty: his **dualism**, or theory that mind and matter are distinct and independent kinds of substances, each capable of existing quite independently of the other.<sup>2</sup> One alternative was **idealism**: the theory that the body itself is nothing but a collection of actual or possible sense-data—sights, sounds, touches, and smells. George Berkeley thought this way. According to this theory, there are only minds and their mental “contents;” hence, there are no problems of causal interaction between radically different kinds of substances. Yet another alternative was **materialism**—the theory that mind is reducible to matter.<sup>3</sup> Still other philosophers maintained a kind of dualism but abandoned the commonsense view that mind and body really do interact causally. Some held, for example, that the wood sliver’s penetration of my flesh does not *cause* me pain; rather, it is the *occasion* for God, whose infinite nature somehow encompasses both mind and matter, to cause me to feel pain, and similarly that my desire to raise my arm is simply the occasion for God’s causing my arm to go up. This is the theory called **occasionalism**. Others held the view called **parallelism**, according to which mind and body only appear to interact because of a kind of “pre-established harmony” between their life histories. Gottfried Leibniz likened this parallelism to two clocks that strike at the same moment, having been wound up together and each designed to keep accurate time, in causal independence of each other.

<sup>1</sup>A number of distinguished philosophers, theologians and scientists, including Pierre Gassendi, Thomas Hobbes, and Antoine Arnauld, were invited to comment on the manuscript of Descartes’ *Meditations* before it was published. Their “Objections” were then forwarded to Descartes, who in turn composed “Replies,” and published the whole exchange along with the original work. The entire discussion is strongly recommended to the serious student of Descartes’ philosophy.

<sup>2</sup>Strictly speaking, the traditional mind-body problem was generated by a conjunction of two theories: (1) dualism as defined above, and (2) the theory sometimes called **two-way interactionism**, the latter being simply the commonsense assumption that mind and body can interact causally: sometimes mental events causing bodily events, as in volition; sometimes bodily events causing mental events, as when a decayed tooth causes pain sensations.

<sup>3</sup>*Materialism* as the name of a philosophical theory should not be confused with various other senses of the word. Philosophical materialists are *not* (necessarily) “persons who tend to give undue importance to material possessions and comforts.” Nor are they (necessarily) “those who think that everybody ought to put their ‘material well-being’ (as measured in dollars and cents) above all other considerations.” A philosophical materialist could, with consistency, denounce materialism in these other senses.

## Introduction to the Mind-Body Problem