

Stephen Lumsden, essay for Units 4-6, Program B: Philosophy Of Mind

(Essay for Question 1. 1. Examine Descartes' argument, in the Sixth Meditation, for the distinction between mind and body. What objections can you conceive being raised against the argument? How would you attempt to defend the argument against those objections)

A Discussion of Descartes Arguments In The Sixth Meditation

In this essay I will briefly summarise the Descartes' distinction between mind and body, as argued in the sixth Meditation, and outline some additional arguments he made to support this. Objections against and defences for Descartes' arguments will be made in order to clarify his views in coming to a conclusion on the matter.

It is important to note that Descartes made two important arguments first before proceeding with his conclusions made in the sixth Meditation. In the first Meditation we are told that we are entitled to doubt anything that is not completely certain. This is built upon in the second where Descartes tells us that the one thing we can be certain of is our own mind and our own sense of self. Everything in the external world may not be certain, but we know that our idea of it is our own. Such arguments, according to Bernard Williams, represent a certain *pre-emptive scepticism* for Descartes to build a required foundation to build all subsequent arguments upon. These then should help us detect any fallacies in previously held assumptions.

Descartes tells us in the sixth meditation that mind and body are closely interrelated, but are entirely separate entities. The body is part of the extended physical realm, occupies space and can be seen as a set of multiple parts within a divisible whole. The mind, and by extension the soul, is essentially an immaterial, non-divisible entity existing in time, entirely independent of the body. The faculties of the mind, i.e. reason, is what helps us interpret the input from the senses, which is our view of the outside physical world. Descartes attributes this reason as something given to us by God and allows us to doubt all else, but not this as "God is not a deceiver". This idea that mind and body are completely separate and this separation accounts for the individual subjective experience, qualia. This is referred to as Cartesian Dualism. This stands in contrast with the physicalist view of the mind, namely our own subjective experience of everything is just dependent on particular bodily functions; in this case the brain and its various physical mental states.

While Descartes admits mind and body may be closely interrelated functional elements of a person, the line which distinguishes them is too thin to recognise. Any connection or divide is too slight to trace. As a result we are asked to view one apparent entity as two separate ones. One is reminded of the case of the planet Venus, which was once confused to be both the morning and evening star when they have always been one and the same. Even if we do allow Descartes this much, how does the immaterial mind interact with the material body? Descartes does not address that question here, but later suggested that the point of contact went through the pineal gland. This smacks of a quick fix solution to his theory, after the fact, when he realised the gap in the logic of his argument.

This does not appear entirely rational, as does his belief that God gives us the faculty of reason, so our minds can make sense of the external world as best as it does. While initially allowing us to posit the idea that we may be controlled by an evil demon, Descartes then asserts that God would not conceivably give us erroneous information of the outside world. Descartes, in his foundational approach, has already proved the existence of God in the third Meditation. He argues that we could only have the ability to conceive of such as supreme being if that being had given us such an ability to conceive of it in the first place, but I am not fully persuaded by this train of thought as it appears to be circular. Consequently, if we do not believe in his argument for God (or just do not believe in God for any other reason), how can we subscribe to his view on our faculty of reason? Additionally

the idea of the mind as an indivisible entity has more recently, with the onset of modern psychology, been disputed. From experiments on split-brain patients Roger Sperry has demonstrated that such cases may show evidence of two minds.

In pointing to the cases of medical exceptions as above though, we are reminded of Descartes own dismissive comments about the judgements of the mentally ill. Even though there may be cases where the mind appears to exhibit several personalities, can we really accept this as sufficient refutation that the mind is a non-divisible entity rather than just symptoms of mental illness? The mind, in its normal operation, may only be able to work as one. Therefore it may not be relevant in viewing it as divisible if that is not within its normal functional limits. Descartes is also right to point out the close interrelated nature of mind and body; so close that, even today, we are still not completely clear of the exact relationship. Because we cannot trace a thought to a physical process, it does not imply that mind and body are one, but merely indicates how little we know of the workings of the relationship.

Likewise can be said when investigating the nature of qualia. We still cannot arrive at a suitable description of the subjective experience. This reinforces the notion that we may still possess some undefinable characteristics of the sense of self. Even, in the future, if we are able to trace our exact emotions back to individual thoughts in the mind, how can we hope to isolate our subjective qualitative experience relating to such actions? In this respect, Descartes may be right in asserting this aspect of qualia may have more intangible qualities than the physicalist will admit to. Additionally if we do not know the origin and cause of our own consciousness and reason, can we fully refute Descartes assertion that reason is the faculty awarded to us by God?

In concluding we are left with more objections to Descartes' argument than defences. However we still cannot completely refute his main argument in the sixth Meditation and also, I believe, cannot refute his foundational points made in the first and second. The sixth Meditation, in light of this, forms a powerful argument in the face of the unknown. Even if Descartes' trust in the limited divine intervention of God may appear dated, this does not detract from his contribution to the area of consciousness.

References

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