

2. Descartes: the distinction between mind and body

It is often said, or assumed, that modern philosophy starts with the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650). For our purposes, his importance lies in the way in which his thinking involves an attempt to give a firm structure to the distinction between mind (or soul)¹ and body: this being a distinction that was, on the one hand, so important in much previous thinking about people, and yet, on the other, rarely articulated with the clarity it deserves.

Descartes' view of what a person is might be summarized in this way. A live human being is composed of two parts: a material body and a non-material mind. It is the latter - the mind, or, as we might say, the soul - that is the real person. For it is here that mental states occur; and it is these states - rather than the physical states of my body - that are fundamental to my life as a person. The body, by contrast, is simply a portion of the material world, distinctive in its particular structure, but no different in its essential nature from a tree, a stone, or, in Descartes' favourite analogies, a watch or fountain; the body, as he often expresses it, is a machine. During this life the mind 'inhabits' the body, in the sense that it is closely causally linked with this particular body. But there is no difficulty in the idea that I - that is, my mind - should continue to exist in a completely non-bodily form after the destruction of my body.

Descartes offers three main arguments for this view of a person. The aim of this section is to introduce you to these arguments, and to help you to come to your own view of their force.

Descartes' first argument: what I can doubt

I would like you now to read a brief extract from one of Descartes' major works: *A Discourse on Method*. While doing so, I would like you to keep the following questions in mind. What are the main conclusions that Descartes claims to have established in each of these two paragraphs (ie one main conclusion in the first paragraph, and one in the second)? What argument does he offer for the conclusion of the second paragraph? When you have finished this extract, please write down, as briefly and clearly as you can, your answers to these questions before reading on. Here is the passage:

I do not know whether I should tell you of the first meditations that I had there, for they are perhaps too metaphysical and uncommon for everyone's taste. And yet, to make it possible to judge whether the foundations I have chosen are firm enough, I am in a way obliged to speak of them. For a long time I had observed, as noted above, that in practical life it is sometimes necessary to act upon opinions which one knows to be quite uncertain just as if they were indubitable. But since I now wished to devote myself solely to the search for truth, I thought it necessary to do the very opposite and reject as if absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see if I was left believing anything that was entirely indubitable. Thus, because our senses sometimes deceive us, I decided to

¹ Descartes uses these terms interchangeably. I will do the same in my discussion of his ideas. If you feel, as many have, that there is an important difference between the terms, you should make a note of points at which you feel that Descartes' conflation of them leads to trouble.

suppose that nothing was such as they led us to imagine. And since there are men who make mistakes in reasoning, committing logical fallacies concerning the simplest questions in geometry, and because I judged that I was as prone to error as anyone else, I rejected as unsound all the arguments I had previously taken as demonstrative proofs. Lastly, considering that the very thoughts we have while awake may also occur while we sleep without any of them being at the that time true, I resolved to pretend that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately I noticed that while I was trying thus to think everything false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing that this truth '*I am thinking, therefore I exist*' was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.

Next I examined attentively what I was. I saw that while I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world and no place for me to be in, I could not for all that pretend that I did not exist. I saw on the contrary that from the mere fact that I thought of doubting the truth of other things, it followed quite evidently and certainly that I existed; whereas if I had merely ceased thinking, even if everything else I had ever imagined had been true, I should have had no reason to believe that I existed. From this I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist. Accordingly this 'I' - that is, the soul by which I am what I am - is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist.
(Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part IV, paragraphs 1 and 2)

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The conclusion of the first of these paragraphs is stated in its final sentence. We can articulate it in this way: The claim 'I am thinking, therefore I exist' is one that he can accept as quite certainly true. The conclusion of the argument of the second paragraph is, in Descartes' own words: '[T]his "I" - that is, the soul by which I am what I am - is entirely distinct from the body'. Descartes' argument for the conclusion that his body is not part of what he really is - or, as he expresses it elsewhere: 'Body does not pertain to my nature' - might be presented in this way:

Premise 1: I can doubt that I have a body - indeed, that any body, any extended thing, exists.

Premise 2: I cannot doubt that I exist. [The point established in the first paragraph.]

Conclusion: Therefore, I am something entirely distinct from the body.

Descartes takes what I have called Premises 1 and 2 to be something that each of us will find, on reflection, to be clearly true in our own case; and he suggests that the conclusion follows immediately from these claims.

What should we make of this argument? There are two questions we might ask about it. First, are the premises clearly true? And second, is the argument valid; that is: assuming that

the premises are true, does the conclusion follow from them? If Descartes' argument fails either of these tests he has not given us good reason to accept his conclusion.

(i) The premises

I would like you now to consider the first of these questions: are Descartes' two premises clearly true? Make a note of your answer to this question before reading on.

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My guess is that you will have found no problem with Premise 2. But what about Premise 1? *Can* I doubt that I have a body? Is Descartes seriously suggesting that if I think the matter over carefully I will have to concede that there really is room for doubt as to whether I have a body? In a later work, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes himself articulates, and then replies to, a protest that we might make to such a suggestion:

Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.

Yet although the senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance, there are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses - for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass. But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.

A brilliant piece of reasoning! As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake - indeed sometimes even more improbable ones. How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events - that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire - when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! Yet at the moment my eyes are certainly wide awake when I look at this piece of paper; I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately, and I know what I am doing. All this would not happen with such distinctness to someone asleep. Indeed! As if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep! As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep. The result is that I begin to feel dazed, and this very feeling only reinforces the notion that I may be asleep.

[Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, First Meditation, paragraphs 3 to 6.]

Here, then, we have a subsidiary argument in defence of Premise 1 of the main argument that we are considering in this section. Descartes' subsidiary argument can be presented in this way:

Premise 1a: I have often dreamed that certain things were going on that were not really.

Premise 1b: I have no way of telling whether I am now awake or asleep and dreaming.

Conclusion: It is possible that, right now, I am simply dreaming that I have a body whereas in reality I do not have one at all.

If that is a good argument we will have to concede that there really is serious room for doubt as to whether I do have a body. Is it a good argument? It seems pretty clear that we must accept Premise 1a. How do you feel about Premise 1b? While it is a claim that has received a good deal of philosophical discussion I do not propose to spend time on it here. I want to focus, rather, on the move from the two premises to the conclusion. That is to say, if premises 1a and 1b were true would the conclusion follow? I would like you to try to formulate your own answer to this. When you have done so, please read the first paragraph of John Cook, 'Human Beings'.

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Cook suggests that, not only is the move from the premises to the conclusion invalid, the conclusion in fact contains a certain kind of incoherence. For I cannot at one and the same time entertain the thought that I might be dreaming – that I might be lying in bed asleep – *and* take seriously the suggestion that I do not have a body. What do you make of that argument? Does it show that Descartes has not established that there is room for a real doubt that he has a body?

I will not comment further on this except to note one point. It will not do to respond that, since he is assuming that only a bodily being can sleep and so dream, Cook is begging the question. It is true that Cook does assume this. But for Descartes to have an *argument* for the claim that there is room for serious doubt as to whether he has a body, he needs the following: what he says provides a reason for this conclusion to someone who does not already think as he does. If his 'argument' *rests on* the assumption that the real person – the 'I' of which Descartes speaks – is something distinct from the bodily being then it is not an argument at all, for it simply presupposes what it aims to prove.

(ii) The step from premises to conclusion

So much for the premises of Descartes' argument. What about the step from the premises to the conclusion? The argument, remember, was this:

Premise 1: I can doubt that I have a body - indeed, that any body, any extended thing, exists.

Premise 2: I cannot doubt that I exist.

Conclusion: Therefore, I am something entirely distinct from the body.

Suppose that Premises 1 and 2 were both acceptable. Would Descartes be justified in drawing from them the conclusion that he does? I would like you to pause to think about this, and to make a note of your answer, or of any relevant ideas that occur to you.

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One way to determine whether or not an argument is valid is to see if one can find an argument of the same form in which, while the premises are true the conclusion is false. Now consider the following argument:

Premise 1: I can doubt that I am the tallest man in Lampeter.

Premise 2: I cannot doubt that I exist.

Conclusion: Therefore, I am something entirely distinct from (ie I am not) the tallest man in Lampeter.

This argument is of just the same form as Descartes' argument. It differs only in that 'have a body' has been replaced by 'am the tallest man in Lampeter'. But now I take it that it is quite clear in this case that both premises could be true and yet the conclusion be false. For it is quite possible that I should suspect that there may be someone taller than me and yet there, in fact, be no such person. So there is something wrong with this argument; and since it is of the same form as Descartes' argument there must be something wrong with that too. We can put the fault in this way: from the fact that I can *doubt* that something is true (for example, that I have a body or that I am the tallest man in Lampeter) it does not follow that it is *not* true

My own assessment of Descartes' first argument for the conclusion that he is something quite distinct from his body is, then, this. We have not been given adequate grounds for accepting the first premise of the argument; and, even supposing the premises to be true, the conclusion does not follow from them. If you disagree with any aspect of my assessment, make a note of how you disagree.

Descartes' second argument: the appeal to the imagination

I want to turn now to another argument: one that is, perhaps, more tempting, and to which Descartes gives a more prominent place. Here is one of Descartes' presentations of this argument:

.... because on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, insofar as I am merely a thinking thing and not an extended thing, and because on the other hand I have a distinct idea of a body, insofar as it is merely an extended thing and not a thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.²

The passage calls for a comment on Descartes' terminology. When Descartes speaks of himself as a 'thinking thing' he is using the term 'thinking' in an unusually broad way. In another work he explains that by 'thinking' he means 'all that which so takes place in us that we of ourselves are immediately conscious of it'. He adds that he includes under the heading 'thinking': understanding, willing, imagining, and perceiving. We might say that by the phrase 'a thinking thing' he means 'a being that has mental states'. Now Descartes takes it to be clear that this - that he has mental states - is what is fundamental to his

² Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, p 51. All references to this work are to the Hackett edition.

nature. If I suffered an irreversible loss of consciousness - an irreversible loss of all mental states - there would, it might be said, be little sense in which I would continue to exist at all.

Descartes' argument for the conclusion that he - that is, his mind - is entirely and truly distinct from his body is, then, this. I can form a conception of myself - conjure up a picture of myself - as a being that doubts, imagines, desires and so on without including anything bodily in that picture. For example, I can imagine what it would be like to find myself having experiences just as if I was seeing this desk and computer screen, thinking about this philosophical problem, feeling emotions of anger, fear or joy, and yet not having a body. We can conclude, Descartes suggests, that the relation between him - that is, his mind - and his body is not like that between, for example, a smile and the face that the smile is on. The smile is not 'entirely and truly distinct' from the face; as we see when we recognise that we cannot form a clear and distinct idea of a smile quite independently of any idea of a face with a smile on it. In that sense, we do not know what it would be for there to be a smile without a face. By contrast, Descartes insists, he is quite clear what it would be for him to exist without a body. In that sense the real person is quite distinct from his or her body.

What should we make of this argument? Here is one objection we might make: 'It does not follow from the fact that we can *imagine* something - that, for example, I can imagine existing apart from my body - that it is possible *in reality*. I can imagine - conjure up a picture of myself - existing without a heart; it does not follow from this that it is in practice possible for a human being to exist without a heart'. Do you think that this is a good objection to Descartes' argument? Can you think of a way in which Descartes might reply to the objection?

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It seems to me that Descartes might say something like this. We need to distinguish between different kinds of 'impossibility'. Compare the 'impossibility' of there being a smile without a face, or a five-sided triangle, with the 'impossibility' of a human being levitating or existing without a heart. The contrast between these cases is sometimes expressed by saying that the first two are 'logically impossible' while the second two are only 'physically impossible'. It is part of what we mean by a 'smile' that it is something that appears on a face; and part of what we mean by a 'triangle' that it has three, and so not five, sides. Something that did not appear on a face, or which did not have just three sides, would not count as a 'smile' or a 'triangle'. By contrast, while a human life is, of course, crucially causally dependent on a functioning heart, there is, it seems, no *incoherence* in the idea that a living human being might lack a heart. As we might put this: if God is not constrained by the laws of physics he might produce something that was correctly described in that way. Now what Descartes hopes to have proved is that the connection between the mind and body is merely causal; there is no *incoherence* in the idea of the one continuing to exist after the destruction of the other. In that sense they are distinct entities: as the arms and the legs of a man are distinct entities, while the smile and the face, or the vase and its shape, are not.

I don't know whether that will seem to you to be a satisfactory reply to the objection. Whatever we may think of that, however, it seems to me that we might press Descartes

further here. Suppose that we formulate his argument like this: ‘Since I can form a conception of myself - conjure up a picture of myself - as a thinking being without including anything bodily in that picture, I can conclude that I – or, at least, my mind - am quite distinct from my body (in the sense in which a smile is *not* quite distinct from the face that the smile is on, or the shape is *not* quite distinct from the vase whose shape it is.)’

It is, I think, helpful in considering this argument to ask: does it follow from the fact that you can draw a picture of something that what you have drawn is possible in reality? I would like you to consider this question, and make a note of your answer to it, with the picture on the following page in mind:



M.C. Escher, *Waterfall*

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Here, we might say, is a picture of a closed, continuously falling stream of water. Can we conclude from the fact that we have a picture of this that such a thing is possible in reality? Now it might be said that we know that in one sense of the word it is not ‘possible’: it is in violation of the laws of physics. But does that really do justice to the matter? The idea of such a closed, continuously falling stream is incoherent - in something like the sense in which the idea of a four-sided triangle is incoherent. As we might express the difficulty: the water beneath the water wheel has got to be both higher than and lower than the water at the top of the waterfall. Yet we have a picture of it!

We might conclude: it does not follow from the fact that something can be drawn that it is, in any sense, possible in reality. Or we might express the point by saying that this is not really a picture of a closed, continuously falling stream; it is simply a picture that one might be tempted to describe in that way if one didn't think too hard about it. It does not much matter in which of these ways one expresses the point. Either way, it must be conceded that no sure guide to what is possible - even to what is logically possible - is to be found in what can be depicted on paper.

An exactly analogous point applies to the imagination. It does not follow from the fact that I can conjure up images that I am inclined to describe as 'me coming apart from my body' that those words are a coherent description of some possibility. The imagination provides no such short cut to substantial philosophical conclusions about what a person is. I should stress that none of this is to say that Descartes' view of the person is *wrong*. It is to say, however, that one cannot establish the correctness of that view in this way.

Descartes' third argument: divisibility

Descartes has one more argument for his conclusion that I – that is my mind – am something quite distinct from this body that I think of as mine. The argument is contained in the second full paragraph on page 56 of Meditation VI ('Now my first observation'). Please now read this. When you have done so, I would like you briefly to summarize this argument in your own words, presenting it, if possible, in the form of two premises and a conclusion on the model of my earlier summaries. Make a note of any objections to it that occur to you.

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We might summarize the argument this way:

Premise 1: I – that is, my mind – am not divisible into parts.

Premise 2: My body is divisible into parts.

Conclusion: I am something quite distinct from my body.

Premise 2 seems to be clearly true. But what about Premise 1? It may have occurred to you that we often speak, without any serious sense of strain, of different 'parts' of the mind: for example, we might say 'Only part of her mind was on the job', or 'That had slipped to the back of my mind'. Again, perhaps you noted that it is now generally accepted that there is a distinction between the 'conscious' and the 'unconscious' parts of the mind. Now I suspect that Descartes, confronted with such observations, might reply that such ways of speaking really cannot be taken very seriously. He consistently thinks of the mind as something that is strongly unified. Two ideas that are of particular importance to his picture of the mind's unity are these. First, he thinks of the contents of the mind at any time as lying only in what is present to consciousness; he has, for example, no time for the idea of unconscious beliefs and wishes: this being an idea that is central to our modern idea, partly deriving from Freud, of the mind as, at least potentially, fractured. And second, Descartes thinks of the mind as an essentially rational domain. All the confusion and conflict in our thinking comes from the influence of the body. Thus, if, as we might say, one part of me wants to do one thing while another part wants to do something else, this is not really a conflict between different parts

of the mind, but, rather, between the rational dictates of the mind and the irrational dictates of the ‘animal spirits’ in the body. (We will come back to this point in the next section of the module.)

One might, at this point, suspect that Descartes’ confident assertion that the mind is not divisible into parts *presupposes* his conclusion that there is a sharp distinction between ‘the mind’ and ‘the body’. If that is a fair judgement, his argument here simply begs the question. Perhaps, however, the argument might be rescued by a slight formulation of Premise 1. Can we not at least say this: ‘The mind is not divisible into parts *in the same sense* as the body is’? For example, in contrast with the body, it makes no sense to speak of cutting a mind in two with a saw, and putting one half of it in one drawer and the other half in another drawer. Is that not sufficient to show that mind and body are distinct in the sense that Descartes is trying to establish?

What do you think of that? Does this give Descartes a good argument?

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Here is one possible response to that argument: ‘If, as many now suppose, the mind is the brain then it *does* make sense to speak of cutting a mind in two with a saw. So Descartes’ argument again simply *assumes* something that he is trying to prove’.

Here is another possible response: ‘We will grant this new version of Descartes’ Premise 1 ie “The mind is not divisible into parts *in the same sense* as the body is”. But his conclusion does not follow from this premise. To see this, consider another argument of the same form: “The shape of a vase is not divisible into parts in the same sense as the vase is. Therefore, the shape and the vase are distinct entities in the sense that we can perfectly well envisage the one existing without the other.” If that is a bad argument, as I take it it is, then so is this new version of Descartes’ argument. Since the shape of the vase is a property of the vase it makes no sense to think of its having an existence independently of the vase. Similarly, for all that Descartes can establish here, it may be that the mind is a property of the body, rather than an independent entity that, in some sense, exists along side it, or within it.

There is one other strand in Descartes’ argument in this paragraph that is worth drawing out. At one point he writes: ‘Although the entire mind seems to be united to the entire body, nevertheless, were a foot or an arm or any other bodily part to be amputated, I know that nothing has been taken away from the mind on that account’. Might this claim provide the basis for an argument for the conclusion that the mind is distinct from the body in the sense Descartes wishes to establish? What do you think?

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It seems to me that the plausibility of Descartes’ claim here may depend on *which* part of the body he asks us to consider. Is it absolutely clear that if my *head* were ‘amputated’ nothing would be taken away from my mind? Some might find this far from clear since, as it might be observed, if my head were cut off I would be dead. Now Descartes might reply that, for all that, my mind might go on existing even though ‘my body is dead’. If, however, he does say this we can note that he seems, again, to be *presupposing* the very thing he is trying to prove: namely, that a mind is an independent entity, existing along side the body.

Conclusion

We have looked at Descartes' three main arguments for his conclusion that his body is not part of what he really is. I have suggested that none of these arguments establishes that conclusion. Now I must stress two things here. First, *I do not expect you to take my word for the claim that the arguments don't work*. You must decide for yourself whether my criticisms are valid. If you judge that, in certain respects, they are not, you should try to make a note of where you think *my* argument goes wrong. And second, as I have noted before, it does not follow from the fact, if it is a fact, that Descartes' arguments do not work that his conclusion is *false*. It follows only that, so far, we have been given no reason to believe it is true. Perhaps you have your own, different, arguments that you would offer in defence of this view of the relation between a person and her body. If so, again, make a note of these.

Reading

Descartes' works, originally written in French or Latin, are available in a wide range of editions and translations. The most recent and authoritative translation is available as a two-volume edition of *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. For various reasons, not all of my references will be to this edition. In particular, when referring to the *Meditations* I use the inexpensive edition published by Hackett. So far as is possible, I will give references to passages from Descartes in a form such that you should be able to track them down in any of the editions available; but you should bear in mind that there are variations in the English translations in the different editions.

For a brief introduction to Descartes, which focuses on his account of what he is, see John Cottingham, *Descartes*. A more detailed, and very accessible, survey and discussion of Descartes' philosophy as a whole, with particular reference to his views on mind and body, is Anthony Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of his Philosophy*. For a detailed discussion of the arguments for Descartes' view of the self I would particularly recommend Peter Smith and O.R. Jones, *The Philosophy of Mind: an Introduction*, chapters 2 and 3.