



Undergraduate assignment feedback form (to be completed by marker)

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Comments: <i>While this piece of work shows knowledge & some understanding of relevant ideas & arguments, there is a lack of attention to detail with regards to the presentation. As such, concepts tend to be oversimplified. This could be tackled by a closer reading of the primary material and by drawing on secondary reading.</i> <i>Importantly, there are lapses in referencing. This must be tackled, not least in order to avoid plagiarism. Relatedly, this work has a plagiarised feel to it, as it is not written in your usual style of writing. I will need to look into this further, but the issue is not helped by the above weaknesses (re: over-simplification & lack of detail, together with reference lapses).</i>	
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Critically discuss the coherence of Descartes' dualist conception of the Self, with reference to plausible alternatives

Introduction

In this essay, I will be discussing Descartes's dualist conception of the self and if you plausible alternatives to his theory on the body and the mind. I will be including some of the work of Gilbert Ryle, Martin Heidegger, Simon Critchley and Chien-Te Lin with some critiques and possible solutions to the problems that are inherent to Cartesian dualism with regards to the conception of the self and the validity of the claims that Descartes makes.

Descartes' dualist conception of the self

Descartes was the philosopher to think up a particular conception and understanding of a thing called 'the self'. His understanding of the self is a dualistic one. This means that the conception of the self is such that even though one seems to have a physical body and that one also thinks, the thing that thinks is what is known as the mind and this thing, the mind, is an immaterial thing. He comes to this conclusion by what is known as radical scepticism. Radical scepticism is where one attempts to doubt everything that one either assumes to exist or considers to have evidence for existing. For example, Descartes's well-known quote, "I think therefore I am" is a conclusion that he gets to through his book which is called The Meditations; he arrives at this conclusion by doubting everything that he had come to learn about the universe which includes his memories and materiality itself, and also includes his own physical/material body. He found therefore that the only thing he could not doubt was that he was thinking about all these things and that even to doubt is to be thinking about doubting, although he did not think that science would be able to account for this thing that is thinking, the mind. Therefore, the mind must be something immaterial. The mind may also be described as a non-material soul. So here we have this conception of the mind and the body, where the body is described as a physical thing and the mind is described as an immaterial thing. The problem arises when it becomes clear through empirical experience that the mind clearly influences how the body behaves and that the body clearly influences how the mind behaves. However, there seems to be no clear connection between the two, when one considers that one is in the realm of materiality which also happens to be the realm that which we can quantifiably measure and discuss, and one is in the realm of what we call

immateriality, that which we cannot quantifiably measure or discuss coherently (the two different realms of non-materiality and materiality existing alongside each other in what Descartes calls "union"). This then leads us to the linguistic description of what non-material means and since we have no way of empirically showing that non-materiality exists it seems that great scepticism is in order when attempting to understand Descartes' conception. The confusion that arises from attempting to understand the suggested coherence of this union, is what has come to be known as the 'Mind-body Problem'.

Ryle's Category-mistake

The philosopher Gilbert Ryle was the philosopher to coin the term, 'category mistake' in his book, *The Concept of Mind*. In part three of chapter 1 of this book, called "The Origin of the Category Mistake" Ryle explains "the differences between the physical and the mental"¹ as Descartes thought it to be so, which is to say that minds cannot be explained by mechanical means, and therefore must be explained through non-mechanical means. One way in which Ryle describes mechanical processes is by saying, "mechanical workings explained movements in space". Thus, describing the non-mechanical processes by also calling them "non-spatial workings" he also compares this to "the difference between the human behaviours which we describe as intelligent and those which we describe as unintelligent" due to "difference[s] in their causation".² By, 'intelligent' he means the workings of the mind, and by 'unintelligent' he means the workings of the body which are known as "fixed action patterns" in the subject of human behavioural biology, such as the action of a flinch at a fast movement of a large object such as a train racing past one's face. This theory is known as a "para-mechanical hypothesis", and it is Ryle's intention to show that it was Descartes's conception of dualism which created a category mistake. He talks of Descartes in the following way, "he and subsequent philosophers naturally but earnestly availed themselves of the following escape route".³ It seems that Descartes was clouded in his analysis of the mind-body problem; this was, partly, because of the fact that he was a religious man, but also a philosopher of science and a big believer in the progress of empirical analysis and yet these

¹ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1969), p. 19

² Descartes The Meditations... in Gilbert Ryle *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1969), p. 19

³ Gilbert Ryle, 1969, p. 19

Use the original/primary source if possible.

two things came into contradiction with one another when Descartes proposed this para-mechanical hypothesis. One of these reasons is that if human beings' bodies work in a purely mechanical manner then it leaves no room for something such as a soul or so-called immaterial 'mind' to exist. Therefore, in order to preserve this possibility, he creates a new category to describe the workings of the mind, assuming that the mind does not work in a mechanical manner simply because at the time they did not have a common mechanical description for such a category. Phenomenologically it can seem as though the mind works in a mysterious way compared to the rest of the body, the example being certain characteristics, such as emotional, 'irrational' decision making, with the assumption that a mechanical process could not possibly create something that would be emotional or irrational. This is the case because to imply something as mechanical is to imply also that it is rational and not subject to emotions. It seems to me to be an empirical contradiction though, to say that the mind is an entirely separate category from the rest of the body, the reason being that one cannot have a mental state of any kind without the influence of bodily experiences and therefore bodily influences.

Ryle goes on to explain that

Though the human body is an engine, it is not quite an ordinary engine, since some of its workings are governed by another engine inside it – this interior governor-engine being one of a very special sort." It is invisible, in-audible and it has no size or weight.⁴

This description accurately shows the polarisations Descartes attempted to create in his mind/body analysis, and yet all of the descriptions seem to be negative value terms created by the simple lack of descriptive qualities that the 'interior governor engine' possesses that he could give the mind in and of itself. (p.20para 2) Instead he uses the descriptions for what is already perceived to be there empirically, which is that the body is mechanical, that it is audible that it can be seen. And so even though the body is seen as a machine like the working of some kind of engine, he describes the mind as a different kind of engine also running alongside the bodily one, but instead 'the mind' has all of these negative characteristics. The problem with this is that these negative characteristics only show a lack there of, "mere negatives"⁵ in descriptive terms. This, as I have mentioned before, creates a bigger issue of

⁴ Gilbert Ryle, 1969, p. 20

⁵ Gilbert Ryle, 1969, p. 20

Could you draw on secondary sources here?

the problem being, how could this immaterial non-spatial inaudible thing have any influence over the body and vice versa? This is what is known as the mind-body problem and it is a problem which Ryle points out as being a mistake, a mistake of categorisation influenced and made biased by Descartes' religious and moral standing at the time. Because of his religious values, for Descartes to think of the human mind as just another part of the bodily machine would threaten his conception of what free will meant. To clarify, for Descartes, being able to author free actions in the world and have free thoughts means, therefore, the possibility of the judgment of someone on a moral basis could be argued, because they are 'free' from the causally determined nature of physical phenomena. So, if it were the case that the mind was another part of the body, then it would be just as causally dependant as the rest of the body as it is a physical thing. Descartes had categorized all other living beings as mindless automatons based on this physical causal reality and therefore the argument that he asserts, would go in complete contradiction of what he believed to be the unique, special qualities of a human being, that separated them from the rest of the other living beings out there, such as apes, dogs or horses.

clarity needed.

The problem of other minds deserves explicit attention here - draw in contemporary readings.

The Buddhist Position

Do you mean all nonhuman beings?

In Chien-Te Lin's paper on, "Rethinking Mind-Body Dualism: A Buddhist take on the Mind-Body Problem", found in the book, Contemporary Buddhism he points out that, "the Buddhist distinction between mind and body is not absolute, but instead merely employed as a communicative tool to aid the understanding of human belongs in a holistic light".⁶ This means that, speaking of one as having an 'I' or 'self' is simply to use these words/categorisations as convenient designators of the holistic continuum, we may want to refer to as the universe. So as Chien-Te Lin also points out "the Buddhist description could perhaps be best described as a middle way approach of 'neither-duality-nor-identity'".⁷ However, the Buddhist system of philosophy describes an understanding that one can, through practice, release one's experience from, 'suffering of the mind' and yet still be able

⁶ Chien-Te Lin, 'Rethinking Mind-Body Dualism: A Buddhist Take on the Mind-Body Problem', *Contemporary Buddhism* 2013, Vol. 14, No. 2, 239-264, p. 239

⁷ Chien-Te Lin, 2013, p. 239

to experience physical pain.⁸ This strongly suggests that a kind of dualism is employed in the practice of Buddhism, yet it is not an understanding that is taken to what Buddhists may call an extreme in understanding, where this distinction comes from and why it is made like Descartes did in the 17th century. The reason for this ~~is~~ is that Buddhism also strongly references what is called, 'ultimate truth' (paramartha satya);⁹ this is simply pointing out that the underlying nature of things is an uncategorised one, that is to say, the underlying nature of things or ultimate truth is that the universe is a continuum and therefore any categorisation of this that is assumed to be 'objective' is simply a category mistake of which Ryle would strongly identify with in his arguments on the 'category mistake'. So the Buddhist understanding of the mind and body could be described as a "conventional dualism",¹⁰ and another way to put it would be to call it a "provisional rather than absolute" distinction.¹¹ He goes on to say

Will you explain?

In Buddhist writings, language and concepts function merely as a temporary means to achieve a higher goal. Rather than being an end in itself, linguistic expression serves as a tool to communicate a diverse range of ideas.¹²

However, just because one could categorise their phenomenological experience of the world, does not necessarily mean that they are correct in their assumption about the legitimacy of the categorisation in the first place as an objective description of the present moment. Even a brief look at the causal relationships of these descriptions can easily lead one down a path of recognising that all, seemingly separate, categories of descriptions, are actually all interconnected with one another in one holistic system and it seems that the very act of attempting to create categories undermines these baseline and emergent understandings of how we use language to attempt to categorise things. Ironically, we create categories to gain a better or clearer understanding of things as they are. In order to categorise anything, we must draw essentially arbitrary lines of distinction, but as we see with many of these examples it turns out the reality of the situation is not so clearly cut. For example, drawing on an example given by Professor Robert Sapolsky,¹³ one person from one part of the world may

⁸ Chien-Te Lin, 2013, p. 240

⁹ Chien-Te Lin, 2013, p. 240

¹⁰ Chien-Te Lin, 2013, p. 240

¹¹ Chien-Te Lin, 2013, p. 241

¹² Chien-Te Lin, 2013, p. 241

¹³ Robert Sapolsky, 'Introduction to Human Behavioural Biology', 2011, Stanford University, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNnIGH9g6fA> [Accessed 17th May 2019]

divide the colour wheel arbitrarily into different categories of colour, yet if one is from a different part of the world where the colours of the colour wheel have different lines drawn at different places, what one person may account as being one colour, another person may account as a different colour, and then if the distinction is to be made on the border of a line where one colour merges into another, it can be even more difficult to determine the 'set differences'. However, of course, if one were to take all of the lines of distinction out from between the other colours then we would easily observe that the colour wheel is in fact a continuum of different and pretty much infinitely dividable colours, one constantly merging into the next and so there would be no category that would be able to describe all colours at once. Therefore, the 'sensible' thing to do seems to be to have the categorisation there, to help us understand it better and yet to try not to fall into categorical thinking while doing so.

What I have described here shows many of the inherent contradictions and even paradoxes that the application of an understanding through categorisation makes. And it is this nature of things that Descartes failed to observe and therefore recognise in his phenomenological experience, during his writing on dualism. Chien-Te Lin also points out that across all schools of Buddhism, "The Agama sutra states for example, that 'consciousness' (vijñāna) and 'name-form' (nāma-rūpa) are interdependent as a whole, much like in the way in which three reeds support each other in order to stand erect."¹⁴ This refers to what Chien-Te Lin calls, "the integrated wholeness of a human being",¹⁵ clearly suggesting that this holistic understanding of a human being from the Buddhist take on things is that there is no dualism to be had here that establishes a mind-body dualism and therefore problem. However, upon closer inspection the descriptions of the distinctions that Buddhism does make can be more than just having two, there is also, "three-way, five-way and six-way distinctions."¹⁶ He mentions after this that all of these distinctions are merely provisional and therefore with this 'conventional' understanding a varying amount of distinctions is a possibility, as follows:

a later Buddhist school, the Yogacara, famously developed the theory of the 'eight consciousnesses' based on the original two consciousnesses and two additional consciousnesses, namely self-consciousness (manas-vijñāna) and storehouse consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna). There is even a ninth consciousness

¹⁴ Chien-Te Lin, 2013, p. 241

¹⁵ Chien-Te Lin, 2013, p. 241

¹⁶ Chien-Te Lin, 2013, p. 241

found in Paramartha's system of Yogacara known as the stainless consciousness (amala-vijnana).¹⁷

Heidegger

— Could you use primary resources?

Martin Heidegger breaks down the distinctions that one has phenomenologically. An example of this is retrospectively thinking, that one can analyse that one's mind not being aware of the actions one takes and thus could be described as the 'unintelligent' such as a person opening a window and in order to get the window open, that person had to turn a handle, and yet that person could be having a deep intellectual discussion and had no conscious rational thought processes attached to the handle in thinking of it as an object that one needed to turn to use effectively. These kinds of phenomenological descriptions have problems inherently attached to them for Cartesian dualism, for as Gilbert Ryle puts it,

The difference between the human behaviours which we describe as intelligent and those which we describe as an intelligent must be difference in their causation; so, while some movements of human tones and lens or the effects of mechanical causes, others must be the effects of nonmechanical causes¹⁸

This muddies the waters of the distinction that Descartes tries to make as a part of the certainty he is trying to find in the book the meditations, the indubitable evidence of the distinction between subjects and objects and the incoherent dualism that he creates to attempt to describe this relationship of just two sorts of things that make up the world. In Simon Critchley's article in The Guardian newspaper, he describes Heidegger's specific term, 'Dasein', as referring to the relationship between these two substances as, "prior to this dualistic picture of the relation between human beings and the world lies a deeper unity that he tries to capture the formula,

"Dasein is being-in-the-world" ...If human being is really being-in-the-world, then this entails that world itself as part of the fundamental constitution one

¹⁷ Chien-Te Lin, 2013, p. 241

¹⁸ Gilbert Ryle, 1969, p.19

closing
quotation
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needed

needs to be human. That is the same, I am not a free-floating self or ego facing a world of objects that stands over against the. Rather, for Heidegger, I am my world. The world is part and parcel be of the fabric of my existence.¹⁹

This way of understanding how we stand in the world both phenomenologically and existentially shows us again that, to think that external phenomena are separate mechanisms, from the mechanisms that make up my phenomenological experience would be a categorical mistake. There is an understanding from the description of Dasein, that we are always in and amongst the world rather than separate from it and to presume otherwise is a mistake in one's own description of their phenomenological context and circumstances. For one cannot be without context when trying to describe anything, therefore, to attempt to describe a self where it is a entirely separate entity from that of the rest of the known world is simply incoherent with one's own phenomenological and existential experience.

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Descartes . . .

¹⁹ Simon Critchley, 2019, p.1, second paragraph