

Topic 2

Theory building: mind / body dualism

What then, we may ask, is this 'I' that thinks?

Descartes attempts to answer this in his 'Second Meditation'. On the one hand, we see ourselves as having certain bodily properties. The properties of the body are physical: it can be seen, touched, occupies a particular space, etc. But, on the other hand, there are also various activities in which humans engage, such as movement, willing, thinking, and so on. These latter actions he attributes to mind. Now, given the presence of the malicious demon, the body can be doubted. But the mind that thinks cannot be doubted, for it is what is doing the doubting.

Continuing with his method of doubt, Descartes states, 'I do not now admit anything which is not necessarily true: to speak accurately I am not more than a thing that thinks, that is to say a mind or soul, or an understanding, or a reason' (Meditation 2). He thus holds that he is a mind, not that 'collection of members which we call the human body' (Meditation 2).

Note that what is usually referred to as Descartes' 'mind-body dualism' (or Cartesian dualism) is thereby set firmly in place. He is, he claims, a mind, not a body: what is essential about him is that he is a thinking thing, and mind is a substance that is essentially different from body. This forms the basis for Descartes' view of knowledge. Certain knowledge derives from the 'I think'; that is, from a conception of the self as a mental substance that is different in kind from matter.

What is distinctive about mind is its ability to reason. We are first and foremost rational beings. Importantly, we use reason to gain knowledge of the world. Reason is the tool that can serve us in our search for certain knowledge. Of course, Descartes has established the Cogito as the foundation of his epistemology purely on the basis of introspection. Thus he holds that by contemplating what he is in isolation from the world he inhabits he can uncover a secure foundation for what can be known. He has placed the subjective self, or the 'I' that thinks, at the heart of his epistemology. What counts as knowledge comes from the certainty that the subjective self can attain through the act of introspection. This view implies a form of individualism with regard to knowledge, and raises a number of important and problematic questions that will form the basis for the study exercises (see 'Study Exercises' attachment).

The problem of solipsism

Even if we go along with Descartes thus far, we still have to consider the problem of the external world, the existence of which Descartes has thrown into doubt. In light of the evil demon scenario, how is it possible for me to be certain of a world outside of my own mind? In order to answer this question, Descartes invokes the existence of God as the sole guarantor of the existence of the external world. His chief argument for the existence of God is the ontological argument. Descartes argues that he has, in his mind, a clear and distinct idea of God as a supreme and perfect being. Since Descartes himself is finite, he cannot himself be the origin of such an idea, so it must have come from somewhere else (Meditation 3). He further claims that existence is an attribute of God's perfection,

since it is more perfect to exist than not to exist (Meditation 5). Therefore, God must exist. Since an essential component of God's perfection is that he is truthful, His existence enables Descartes to argue for knowledge of an external world. Since God is truthful, it follows that he would not allow us to be deceived with regard to the perceptions that we have by way of our senses. God's existence thereby serves to ensure that our perceptions of the external world are accurate.

We can raise a number of objections to Descartes' arguments here. Even if it is the case that in order for something to be perfect it must exist, it does not follow that there is something that exists which is perfect. Besides this, we could say that although perfection may be a special kind of property, like goodness, existence itself is not a property at all. But what is most problematic for Descartes' arguments is that if we can find convincing reasons for doubting that God's existence can be proven by rational argument, then we are not going to be convinced that He can serve as the foundational principle for our knowledge of the external world. This is a serious problem: since proof of God's existence is needed to establish the reality of something outside the self and His existence is the foundation for any attempt to do so, if this proof fails then Descartes' hopes for knowledge are seriously curtailed. We then become unable to be certain of anything more than our own existence as a thinking thing.

References

Descartes, *Meditations* [1641], in *Key Philosophical Writings*, ibid.