

GOING FURTHER : Descartes on Soul, Mind and Body

Meet the Thinker

Name: Rene Descartes

Lived: *France (1594-1650)*

Key Ideas: *Cogito, Rationalism, Dualism, Arguments for God*

Known as: *The father of modern philosophy*

Cause of death: *Early mornings in Sweden (Google it)*



Introduction

In his book the Meditations, Descartes attempts to rethink Philosophy effectively starting from scratch and only believing things that it is not possible to doubt. In the first chapter (meditation 1) His 3 waves of doubt are 1) to doubt anything based on the senses (as sometimes our senses can be wrong) 2) to doubt anything that could be a dream (we might be dreaming now!) and 3) to consider the possibility that the universe is run by an evil demon who just delights in deceiving us. He doesn't actually believe this. It is a thought experiment to prove his point. Faced with these 3 things, it seems that philosophers can know nothing. He establishes that everything including the existence of his own body can be doubted.

Meditation 2

1. Descartes argues in the Second Meditation that if there is anything of which he can be certain it is that he exists, because even the most cunning deceiver could not deceive him about such a matter. Yet Descartes' certainty about his existence is only in terms of him being "a thinking thing", and this means that, **while he has proved his existence as a mind, he has not proved the existence of his body** (*he may be still being deceived into thinking that he has a body*).
2. All this informs Descartes' position for the rest of the Meditations. The existence of the mind is logically independent of the body Descartes therefore argues that **a person is composed of two substances, mind and body**, rather than just one, and **this position is known as Dualism**.

Differences between Mind and Body

1. Descartes argues that the "Cogito" (I think therefore I am) enables him to identify the essential nature of the mind and this is that it is a "thinking thing". **The essence of mind is thought, which is non-physical.**
2. Descartes Wax Argument involves Descartes placing a lump of Beeswax next to a source of heat. It is hard, has shape, is a solid and has a smell. The wax melts and all of those things are no longer true. The only thing that is still true is that the wax takes up space (has extension). This is the essential property of matter according to Descartes. The wax argument* enables Descartes to identify the **essential nature of physical matter** (including the body) and this is **that it is extended** (occupies space). Remember that is the only thing that remains once the wax has changed.
3. The point is that the **mind and body are composed of substances, which have incompatible qualities**. The essence of mind is non-physical thought, while the essence of body is extension of physical space. What this means, he argues, is that **they cannot be one and the same thing**. Also it should be clear that while a **physical thing can be divided into sections or parts**,

something that has no physical location cannot be so divided. **Mind, then, is indivisible as well as immaterial.**

Meditation 6 : How are the mind and body linked?

Descartes interchanges the use of the words mind and soul in other works. He regards the mind/soul as more important than the body. At one stage in Meditation 6 he states that **'the mind is me.'** and **'I am distinct from my body and can exist without it.'** (*Independence*) Yet at other times Descartes asserts that there is a strong connection between mind and body **'I am not merely in my body as a sailor is in a ship.'** **'I am closely joined to it, intermingled with it so to speak.'** (*Intermingling*) Then he states **'my whole self, in so far as I am a combination of body and mind'** Descartes is walking a fine line between two different ideas and he may or may not get away with it!

Can Descartes exorcise the ghost?

Such descriptions of the physical body and the non-physical mind led one philosopher (Gilbert Ryle) to suggest that Descartes was putting a doctrine of **"The Ghost in the Machine"**. Descartes never himself came up with much of a response to problems such as interaction and certainly did not do so within the Meditations.

Descartes later suggested that a gland at the base of the brain was the place of interaction between the mind and the body, but this view is at odds with Descartes' own account of the mind as not being located in any place. In the end, Descartes seems to have given up trying to make sense of his position and retreated into vague assertions about what must be the case. Thus, towards the end of his life, in discussion with a young writer called Burman, he suggested that he could not explain the relationship between mind and body, but that "experience" showed that such a relationship must exist.

Ryle argues that Descartes view is one huge mistake. It is a special type of mistake, a category mistake. A person speaking of the mind as Descartes does makes the mistake of thinking of the mind in the wrong way, of treating it as one type of thing when it is in fact another. Ryle illustrates this with an example: imagine a foreigner visits Oxford or Cambridge University. He is shown the colleges, the libraries, the playing fields, museums, accommodation and offices. Suppose he were to say 'yes I have seen all these things but where is the university itself?' This is the same sort of mistake that Descartes makes with the mind. The visitor wrongly assumes that the university is something else.